Kinoko Nasu

Illustration:
Koyama Hirokazu
(TYPE-MOON)

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Decoration Disconnection Disorder

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Decoration Disorder Disconnection

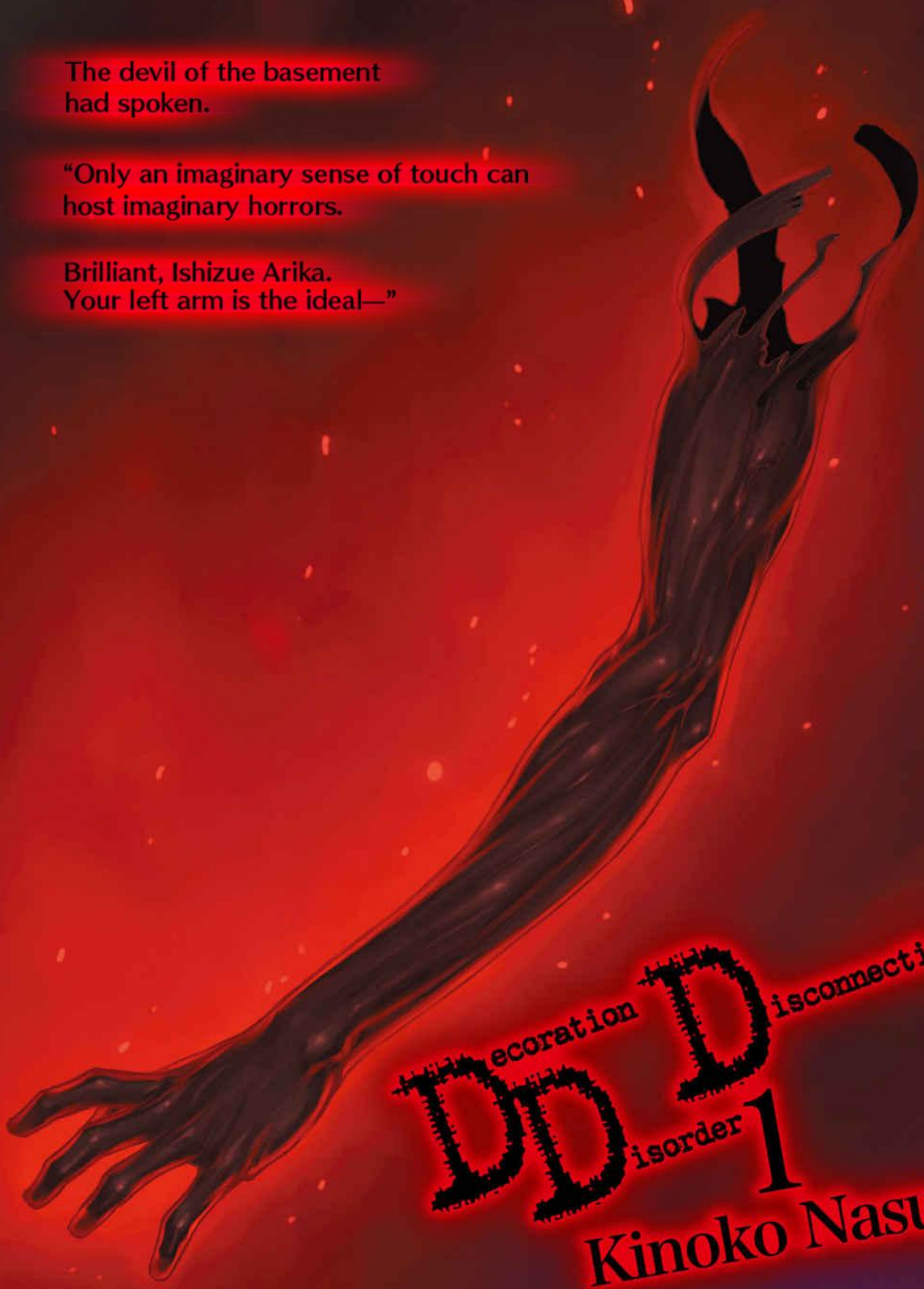
KODANSHA BOX

It was a night of faint, grating bone. The beautiful, blossoming sound of life.

The devil of the basement
had spoken.

"Only an imaginary sense of touch can
host imaginary horrors.

Brilliant, Ishizue Arika.
Your left arm is the ideal—"



Decoration Disconnection Disorder 1

Kinoko Nasu

Illustration／KOYAMAHIROKAZU (TYPE-MOON)

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Illustration/KOYAMAHIROKAZU(TYPE-MOON)
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Decoration Disorder Disconnection Volume 1

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1. J the E.

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I awoke to the faint sound of grating bone.

In the dead of night, I opened my eyes to find I had lost all sensation in my limbs. Like a transparent chrysalis, my consciousness had shrunk to the size of a palm, sealed within my own brain. No matter how much I struggled to move my arms and legs, my sleeping body refused to obey. Only my left arm remained tethered to my sealed consciousness.

I could feel the pulsing of my blood as information. An illusion where a mere fragment began to replace the whole. With only my left arm capable of movement, my entire existence, Ishizue Arika, was condensed into that single limb.

"...Ah."

That left arm—no, my entire being—ached. A grinding sound echoed. A chilling sensation, as if my body were being whittled away. A perverse pleasure, as if I were being devoured whole. The visceral realisation that I was being consumed, bit by bit, with cold indifference. As my left[self] arm vanished, free[I]dom finally returned.

In the darkness, the faint, wet slurping persisted. I tore off the blanket. The bed was drenched in crimson. A girl, her face stained red from the nose down, smiled at me with a shattered jaw.

"...You were suffering, weren't you, Big Bro?"

The little girl was possessed by something foul. My left arm was gone, cleanly devoured. No pain, no bite marks. With her broken jaw, she licked the raw edge, as if to fill the void left by what had been lost.

It was a night of faint, grating bone. The beautiful, blossoming sound of life.

J the E.

Illustration ／ Koyama Hirokazu (TYPE-MOON)

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I remembered now. It was the end of summer, just after I'd finally been discharged from a hospital that felt more like a prison. I was deep in thought, wrestling with whether I should go back to university.

At that time, I found myself at the doorstep of a neighbour I was vaguely acquainted with—Mr. Kizaki. It was 7:00 PM, already dark. I skipped the doorbell and niceties altogether, slipping in through the front door.

Truth be told, I'd been prepared to smash a window if it came to it, but the door was thankfully unlocked. How careless. To anyone watching, it would've looked like a kid trying to pull off a small-time burglary. And the annoying part was, they wouldn't have been that far off the mark.

For exactly a month ago, on September 12th, I *had* broken into this house with the intent to steal.

Rumour had it there'd been a family suicide in Shikura Hills.

The local police officer got the news first thing in the morning—a call from the head of the Kizaki household, apparently.

"Last night, the three of us—parents and child—killed ourselves together. If this drags on, it'll cause trouble for the neighbours. Please come and handle it as soon as you can."

A sick joke, if you asked me. The officer who picked up, on the other hand, didn't seem to find it funny at all. He headed straight to the Kizaki residence, only to be completely overwhelmed, and was never heard from again. When his partner went to look for him later that afternoon, the same thing happened.

By midday, the police box in Block 2 of Shikura Hills was empty, and the news spread faster than the police department could catch on. Although it didn't make the headlines, it *did* end up becoming the talk of the neighbourhood. "Oh my, that one officer just vanished into the Kizaki house! Oh, ho ho! And why's it been all closed off

since yesterday? Oh ho ho ho ho!" That's what the neighbourhood wives would chime in with. Hard to tell if they were just particular or straight-up nosy.

By a little past two in the afternoon, the rumours had already reached the ears of the more curious folk around town. And somehow, I ended up somewhere down their list, seeing as I got some calls that afternoon. I didn't quite recall the natter details, but the call log had the exact timestamps.

Just before sunset, at 6:40 PM, there were two calls: one from Tsuranui Mihaya and another from Karyou Kaie. Nothing bad would come out of ignoring Tsuranui, but Kaie? Now *that* was a problem. They were the kinda person who loved cell phones but hated actually using them. So I'd learned to never expect any good news when they called.

Then, just shy of seven, after the sun had fully set, a third call came in. No caller ID. I took a moment before picking up.

The man on the other end was brief.

He introduced himself as Kizaki, gave his address, then said, "I'm sorry, I'm just so tired. Please exorcise me," before hanging up with that genuinely apologetic line.

There was nothing I wanted more than to hit the bed and get more sleep, but there were three reasons I couldn't turn a blind eye to this.

First, my desk was buried under a plethora of memos. Probably a heads-up from Kaie, filling me in on the Kizaki family suicide earlier that day. Second, the address I'd just heard—Shikura Hills, Block 2, 4-7. That was just three houses down from mine. *Damn it.* And third, I'd borrowed Kaie's prosthetic arm and hadn't given it back. Talk about bad timing.

Everything was set up perfectly. If I played my cards right, I might even walk away with a prize from Ms. Mato. I'd never heard of civilians getting paid for helping the cops, but I could still hope she'd cut me some slack down the line.

Alright, let's do this. Some quick calculations told me the potential payoff was more than worth the effort.

Before heading out, I skimmed through the memos. Among them, one line stood out, written in red ink: "You'll die if you look into his eyes."

Seriously? What sorta urban legend had I just walked into? The effort-to-reward ratio had tilted slightly back in favour of effort. But now that I was already geared up, heading back to my room would make it feel like I'd wasted my time.

So, here I was, at the Kizaki residence.

The front door I'd slipped through had an odd texture—taut yet springy, like the flesh of a freshly sliced persimmon or apple, damp with moisture.

I stepped inside with my shoes on. The lingering reek of daily life seeped from the wooden walls. The narrow, flimsy hallway creaked underfoot, threatening to give way entirely. The flickering light above buzzed restlessly, and yet the room was steeped in an off-putting darkness, as though it had been lacquered in black film.

The living room TV was blaring some Sunday evening anime staple. You know, just another episode in the never-ending saga of a perfectly average, middle-class family. And there, in front of those characters who'd stayed together for decades, were the bodies of a family that hadn't managed to do the same. The mother and daughter, perhaps.

The former was slumped over the table, while the latter lay sprawled out on the floor. Both were face down, yet their eyes glared straight up at the ceiling. Their expressions were heartbreaking—faces twisted in sorrow, as if they'd used up a lifetime's worth of tears. Had this week's episode of Sazae-whatchamacallit been some kind of poignant tearjerker? Well, people also made faces like that when they encountered incomprehensible violence.

But seriously, how the hell did they end up like this?

Suicide by hanging is common enough, but snapping someone's neck like that? That takes some *serious* force. It looked like someone had clamped their head in a vice and just… twisted.

Not that it mattered. Mulling over things beyond my understanding wouldn't do me any good now. A locked-room murder at the scene of a burglary? Not the burglar's problem.

Soon enough, the week's dose of televised family bonding came to an end. Leaving the credits to roll, I headed for the stairs.

The film swathing the house interior started to fester, and as I made it to the second floor, it morphed, transmuting into something else entirely. The wooden hallway had congealed into cold concrete. Black turned to white. The grimy corridor now looked like some grim religious mural.

"Crap. Did I fall asleep?"

This was bad. My dreams and reality were starting to blur.

I didn't know where they had swapped, but at the far end of the hallway, right past the corner, stood a figure not unlike the shrivelled husk of a tree.

"Um, could you be a priest?"

The shrivelled husk's voice was clear and resonant.

Damn it. I was clearly stuck in some random dream that had nothing to do with the Kizaki residence.

"Sorry, but I'm not a priest. Besides, when was the last time you saw one walking around with a black dog?"

"But you're supposed to help us Possessed. You're like those priests in the movies who perform exorcisms, aren't you?"

"It's not exorcism—it's expulsion. Got a similar ring, but trust me, it gets way messier."

And by messier, I mean it destroys the person along with the devil. Sure, they might come out of it looking like ordinary human beings, but they've got no shot at ever fitting back into society.

Besides… real devils are practically nonexistent. What *you* have is a diagnosable illness. A rare one, sure, but still just a mental disorder. I wish people would quit throwing all this 'Devil Possession' crap around.

"Listen, I'm not a priest, and even if I were, I wouldn't be able to fix whatever's going on with you. Either learn to live with it or admit yourself to that big hospital. Even this black dog doesn't seem interested in you."

"—IT HURTZ ZOO MUCH."

Static filled my vision.

For a split second, I stared into a lair of filth and rot, its floors caked with dung. It felt like one of those bargain-bin horror CDs where ghosts popped up between tracks.

"...Let me say it again, since there seems to have been a disc skip: go to a hospital."

"Aaaaaaah! No, no, no! You're not listening! I-I'm not sick, I'm not sick at all! I've been doing everything right, just like Mum told me to! I studied every day, got good grades, and made Mum happy even after Dad left! So why are you saying these things just because I'm a little broken?!"

The concrete walls started to warp.

No, scratch that—they were *melting*. The sheer will of the figure's emotions was liquefying the hallway itself.

This was bad. At this rate, I'd be melting right along with it.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on a second. Seriously, this is getting scary. Just... calm down, okay? ...Alright, let's both take a breath. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions and called you sick. That was on me."

Calling a stranger a priest was one thing, but I wasn't about to argue semantics now. One wrong word, and I'd be dead. Dream or not, getting offed wasn't exactly on my bucket list.

"But wouldn't it make more sense to call a doctor instead of a priest? I get it—you don't want to be called sick. But isn't that still better than being labelled Possessed?"

At the very least, they'd be treated like a human being. And either way, it was pretty clear something was not normal about them.

"How could that *possibly* be better?! You don't get it at all! I'm not okay—I'm not okay at all! I couldn't be any further from okay, it's not even funny! Can't you see?! I know what I'm supposed to do and what I'm not supposed to do, but I keep doing both anyway! Mum keeps saying it's some illness, but it's not. I'm Possessed. I can't get better because it's not my fault! It's the devil inside me!"

The figure's screams went on and on. The concrete melted again and again. I was terrified, absolutely terrified. I mean, my damn cheeks were starting to dissolve.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! This is bad! Help me out here! I don't wanna get dissolved in some messed-up dream!"

"Then take it back. Say that I've been possessed by a devil."

A sharp correction.

Ugh, this lunatic was giving me whiplash with their mood swings.

"Alright, fine. Let's say, for argument's sake, that you *have* been possessed by a devil. But come on, isn't that kinda embarrassing? People feel sorry for you if you're sick, but Possessed? That's like, instant pariah status. You really wanna carry that around?"

The melting slowed. The figure seemed… pleased?

"No, you still don't get it. What kinda priest *are* you? Aren't you supposed to know this stuff? Listen—in the West, devils go after people who don't believe in God. They claw at every rotten, buried piece of your soul and force you to confront your own sins. It's *not* an illness. If it were, I'd be getting better by now, wouldn't I? But this? This is different. Once the devil's gone, it'll strip away the stain of original sin we all bear and make me immaculate again."

Yeah, except we're not in the West. And in Japan, the whole 'sin and punishment' thing doesn't really fly. The only devils we've got poking around aren't the biblical kind—they're devious, man-made knockoffs.

"Huh. So you're a devout Christian, huh? Alright, let's set aside the whole money laundering thing for a sec. You telling me that if someone's never heard of God, they can't be possessed?"

"Exactly. Knowledge and faith are two different things. Without knowing God, you'll never truly perceive devils either. So, that's why—"

Ahhhhhhh. Right, right. I get it now.

"So what you're really saying is, God and devils are basically two sides of the same coin?"

Call them partners, call them accomplices—either way, it's all the same.

The figure looked even happier now, the melting having stopped completely. Beneath the dissolved layer, the original wooden hallway of a typical middle-class home reappeared.

Lucky me.

I could see the bedroom door now—once I made it through, I'd be free of both this nightmare and them.

"Do you get it now? God sends devils to test us. I'm being tested. I've been *chosen*. Once this devil's gone, I'll go back to being myself again! ...But everyone just mocks me. This isn't an illness. I know it's not me—it's something else pulling the strings. That's right, even when I hit Mum, or trash my room, or when all my friends make fun of me—it's all because God is trying to save me!"

"Uh. Well, I mean—"

I stopped myself.

Debating someone's personal beliefs wasn't my thing, and this conversation was going nowhere fast.

"I think I see where you're coming from, but why are you telling *me* all this?"

"Why are *you* asking me that? Aren't we the same? Look at you—you're missing a piece of yourself as well."

I reached for the bedroom door.

"Don't get too cosy, stranger. I'm the one getting eaten, and you're the one doing the eating. Just because we look alike doesn't mean we're of the same breed."

Click.

The door swung open easily.

White turned to black.

Good—I was now back in the Kizaki family's little domestic nightmare.

The bedroom I stepped into was dimly lit. The shutters were closed, and only a small bulb provided any light. The room was stuffy, like a sauna, probably because it was sealed tight.

There were two beds. On the far one, a man in a suit sat with his back to me, slumped over like he'd given up on everything.

He hadn't noticed me yet.

From his build, I figured he had to be the head of the Kizaki household. Unlike the two downstairs, his neck was intact—still human.

Which meant he was alive. *Of course* he was. If he wasn't, he couldn't have made that phone call about the family of three committing suicide together.

I crept forward, careful to keep my footsteps silent. Mr. Kizaki's back was still turned. I couldn't tell if he'd noticed me or not. His hunched posture reminded me of a derelict museum on the verge of collapse.

The bed was only about a metre and a half away. Just three more steps, and I'd be close enough to lunge at him, no matter what state he was in.

But then, something got in my way.

Thud. An obstacle at my feet.

What the hell? This thing's huge—

"…"

It was a human corpse, eyes frozen in a lifeless stare.

A police officer's body. No, two of them. Both had their necks twisted, sprawled face down on the floor.

"Good evening. I didn't think you'd show up so soon."

I instinctively looked up. In that instant, a chill ran through me, and my breath snagged in my throat. In the corner of the room, a large mirror caught Mr. Kizaki's reflection.

Our eyes met.

Oh no.

Through the mirror, we recognised each other.

"You'll die if you look into his eyes."

"—Ah."

Every muscle in my body seized up.

It *hurt.* It felt like being stretched on a roller, over and over, relentless and excruciating. Worse yet, I couldn't so much as twitch a finger.

This was too much. Just one glance, one moment of eye contact, and my entire nervous system was thrown into chaos. At my feet were two corpses with twisted necks. In front of me was a tired middle-aged man, his back turned but his eyes fixed on me through the mirror.

The room was like a sauna, dark and suffocating.

No, seriously, this was terrifying. I couldn't even roll my eyeballs, let alone look away from him. Worst of all, I'd lost control of my body and hadn't taken a single breath since this all started.

"So, you're the one, huh? The exorcist who's supposed to free the Possessed? …Hm? Wait, aren't you Arika? From the Ishizue family?"

Our eyes were still locked, so I couldn't react. As long as he held my gaze, I was completely at his mercy.

"That's right, you're Arika. You just got out of the hospital, didn't you? What was the reason for your hospitalisation again? My apologies, I've been so swamped with work lately that I haven't had a second to keep up with my neighbours. My daughter kept bugging me for an allowance to visit you, but did she ever actually go?"

I had no idea. There was no way for me to know if she'd really visited. Wait. Weren't visitors banned at that hospital?

"This is quite the predicament. I've, well… I've apparently fallen victim to what you'd call Possession. That's why I've barricaded myself in this room. I wanted to be alone until the exorcist arrived. I'd rather not involve anyone else if I can help it. I don't want to be reported, nor do I want any bad rumours circulating. At my age, there's only a thing or two I'd value more than how society judges me."

Slowly, Mr. Kizaki's face lifted. He was clearly ready to kill.

Wait, that's me! I'm the expeller you're talking about! Don't jump the gun! I'll hear you out, whatever it is!

"But even that only matters if you have a family to maintain. You saw my wife and daughter downstairs, didn't you? It's been a day since they… ended up like that, but they haven't started rotting yet, have they? It's already September, but the summer heat's no joke. I considered putting them in the fridge, but there simply wasn't enough room. I was hoping to deal with it before the neighbours started raising questions,

but... well, it doesn't matter now. No, it never mattered in the first place. For some reason, they both chose to die with me. What a pointless gesture. In the end, my family just became a burden."

Mr. Kizaki began to turn around. The gaze we'd shared through the mirror slowly shifted until we were facing each other directly. At the same time...

"Don't worry, I won't burden you any longer. I'll end my own life before anyone else gets caught in this. I should be dead already, but for whatever reason, I just can't seem to follow through. Last night, I tried twisting my own neck, but..."

My neck. It started to twist, tracking Mr. Kizaki's movements, rotating sideways with a sickening *creak*.

"I wanted to die alone. I didn't tell my wife, but I handed in my resignation a week ago. I'm tired. So goddamn tired. I was so exhausted I didn't even *realise* how exhausted I was. I'm over fifty now. Isn't it about time I earned a little freedom?"

Let's say Mr. Kizaki's neck was at zero degrees when his back was turned. Now it was at twenty-five degrees. This was bad. I was starting to piece together what exactly his Possession entailed.

"But my family wasn't having it. 'You can't just quit your job like that,' she said. 'Your body doesn't belong to you alone. You have a duty to provide for us.' She was *livid*. You know, Arika, after all these years, I've learned one thing: a woman's hysterics are absolutely exhausting. I think it's a talent only women have. We men are too proud to act like children anymore."

Forty degrees, sixty degrees.

My neck started twisting right along with Mr. Kizaki's. By the way, ninety degrees is practically sideways. Beyond that, even being generous, 120 degrees is probably the breaking point.

"Let me make one thing clear—I never wished for my family to take their own lives. All I wanted was solitude. The reason... oh, what was it again? Ah, right. At my age, I made a huge blunder at work. I tried to recoup the losses, but it was like dousing a fire with a jug of water. The higher-ups were breathing down my neck, and the debt kept piling up. There was no salvaging it, not in this lifetime."

Ninety degrees, one hundred degrees.

Crick. The sound of my cervical spine grinding was unbearable. My neck couldn't twist any further. The human body isn't built for this. But Mr. Kizaki's neck moved so smoothly. It was like his spine had been refashioned into some kind of rotary mechanism. Wait, was that a full 360-degree rotation?

"So I decided to die alone, but my wife and daughter wouldn't allow it. No, they insisted that if I was going to take my life, I should at least leave them some money first. What an absurd notion. I told them I was simply exhausted with everything, and that's why I wanted to die, but they never understood. So, without a single word, I attempted to take my own life right in front of my wife. But something must've come over them. In the end, my wife and daughter twisted their own necks and chose to die alongside me."

That's literally on you.

120 degrees, 130 degrees.

My neck kept turning. Drawn in by the possessed Mr. Kizaki, the necks of those around him began to twist.

The condition he gained from being Possessed. The lesion: the neck. The mutation: incitement. The cause: overwork.

Go to hell.

Mr. Kizaki seemed oblivious to his own condition, shutting down his thoughts and repeating this cycle of murder-suicide. Anyone who locked eyes with him was forced to mimic his movements. This was no joke. That old man's neck might swivel like it's second nature, but human necks weren't built for this. *I'm going to die. In a few seconds, I'll—*

"But you know, I started to wonder. If I'm duty-bound to provide for my family, doesn't that mean they're bound by the same duty to die with me? After all, they can't survive without me, right? If so, following me into death is the natural conclusion. My wife and daughter carried that out, didn't they? It's suffocating. To think they'd cling to life so desperately. These so-called family bonds are really nothing but an unconscious hell."

Mr. Kizaki's head turned completely backwards. A clean one-eighty. His neck rotated perfectly. Mine wrenched off-kilter, and then—*crack.*

▪▪▪

Ragged breaths choked the air. The black dog snuffled eagerly, tracking the sliding neck. The room was dark, but that wasn't a problem. Being blind, it didn't need light anyway. My prosthetic left arm, now detached, fished something formless out of the neckless stump.

There, there. Be a good boy and chow down now, Loathing. Oh, the name's temporary, by the way.

1 / junk

Waking, I found my vision submerged in blue. The sky felt incredibly close.

"Huh...?"

In fact, it had melted into an ocean. Pale sunlight, rippling languidly with the currents, bathed over me and the stone room.

The dark shadow of a fish ghosted silently across the vivid blue. The massive aquatic creature overhead cut through the water, slicing cleanly through ribbons of searing brightness. Easily over two metres long, it looked awfully like a shark. I had no clue what kind of fish it actually was, though. If you asked me whether sharks could live in freshwater, I wouldn't have the faintest idea how to answer. Honestly, I wasn't even sure if it *was* a fish. The shadow drifted away, as if my gaze displeased it. It trailed upward, or perhaps sank, deeper into the abyss.

It felt like the world had turned upside down, but it was a familiar sight. Nothing out of the ordinary. The ceiling was glass, and above it loomed a vast water tank. Or more accurately, this room sat underneath it.

This was a basement, and the 'sea' above was nothing more than an old reservoir. A basement capped by a body of water, like something torn from the blueprints of a medieval keep; an anachronism haphazardly misplaced.

This was the edge of Shikura City, a secluded residence tucked deep in the woods on the outskirts, and the home of Karyou Kaie.

"Oh? You awake, Arika?"

A flat voice drifted from the canopy bed at the centre of the room.

From where I stood, the figure was little more than a silhouette, but it belonged to none other than the master of this room. Then again, Kaie was always cloaked in shadow no matter the angle. The bed was positioned so that their face remained obscured unless you were right beside them.

The basement itself was a large, square, box-like space. A glass ceiling rested atop walls of coursed brickwork. Doors punctuated all four sides, though I'd only ever made use of the southern one. The interior was devoid of any homeliness, save for a small refrigerator squatting in the corner of the room. Antiques cluttered the space, a jumble with no discernible order—easily mistaken for a junk warehouse.

"Sorry, I was asleep. Did you need something while I was out?"

"Not really. But now that you're up, how about making yourself useful? I'm parched, fetch me some water."

I'd just woken up. Maybe it was the lingering unease from the nightmare, but I instinctively reached for my neck as I sat up from the sofa, just to make sure it wasn't twisted. There was no running water in the room. Kaie's only water source was a stash of distilled bottles stockpiled in the fridge.

I ambled over to the corner, where a mountain of globes threatened to engulf the fridge, and casually opened it with one hand. ...Crap, why was the inside completely yellow?

"All you've got is coloured drinks!"

"If we're out of water, that's fine. Grapefruit will do."

For someone stuck in bed, they were surprisingly health-conscious. Honestly, they seemed more spirited than I was, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was because they actually paid attention to such things. If dietary habits were the key to differentiating people, then I, with my omnivorous appetite, was probably a lost cause.

But that was fine—we omnivores love junk food. Saving money on meals every day and shaving a few years off our already-too-long lives? Sounded like a win-win. I snuck a sip of the cheap, watered-down citrus soda before tipping the faint yellow liquid into a fancy glass.

The mirror next to the fridge flashed back to a one-armed man. It was an unpleasant sight. The man, me, was missing his left arm, neatly lopped off at the bicep. I thought it looked kinda cool, like a villainous cyborg, but the tough-guy facade didn't make it any less of a pain in the ass.

I'd lost my left arm in an accident two years ago. And I mean *lost*. Like, how do you even lose an arm *that* cleanly? I should be counting my blessings that it was just an arm and my life wasn't on the line.

Anyhow, after a year and a half of rehab, I was discharged. Job hunting and socializing were a bit of a hassle, but I had no real complaints about being one-armed. I was scraping by with side gigs like this and, all things considered, figured I was rather fortunate. If I had to pick a gripe, it was definitely the reality check of realising I couldn't even tie my own damn shoelaces.

"Hurry up, hurry up! Arika, you're so slow!"

I shut the fridge and hustled over to my ever-demanding employer. I couldn't walk properly. Must've kinked my neck in my sleep.

"Thanks. The truth is, it's been five hours since my last drink."

The room's master tipped their head slightly and took the glass. Karyou Kaie's black, artificial right arm moved fluidly as they knocked back the pale yellow drink.

"Perfect. So, looks like you were having a nightmare. What was it about?"

"Hm? It was kinda like binge-watching a bunch of awful late-night showings. …Wait, never mind. You wouldn't get it."

"Probably wouldn't. I've never been to a movie theatre myself. Are late-night showings even supposed to be interesting?"

Obviously, dumbass. Don't get the wrong idea—late-night showings aren't just for third-rate films that can only be screened after midnight. Nowadays, they're the perfect time to enjoy some true cinema. Not that there's any point explaining that to someone who doesn't even grasp the concept of movies.

"Forget it, that was a bad example. Just some nasty old story I had a dream about."

"Hmm."

Kaie stared at me blankly. My employer, the master of this basement. The first thing you'd notice would be their prosthetic arm: a sleek, black, and plaster limb that looked like it had been swiped off a mannequin. So, they were missing an arm, just like me. But still undoubtedly in a league of their own when it came to eccentricity.

Fourteen or fifteen years old, with long, silky black hair and features so delicate they could floor just about any man. But be warned—he was a guy. Mortifying, I know, but a guy nonetheless. And I should know; it was love at first sight for me, after all.

His name was Karyou Kaie, but I just called him Kaie. Rolled off the tongue better. This spoiled brat, who could pass for a doll-faced girl if he just knew when to shut up, was a piece of art God had seemingly created on a whim. He was also proof of God's terrible taste.

"So, care to share what that 'nasty dream' was about? I'm curious. You were squirming so much but somehow stayed fast asleep. I couldn't help but wonder how you managed to sleep through it all," he asked playfully. Kaie was always bored, so anything remotely interesting piqued his insatiable curiosity.

"...I told you, it was a nasty dream, and that's all it was. Don't make me relive it. It still turns my stomach just thinking about it. I almost died, you know."

Actually, I *did* die. My neck twisted all the way around.

"Wait, you dreamt about dying? Well, that sure explains your constant screams of 'Stop!' and 'Help!' *Tch*. Pity you woke up so soon. Would've been more fun if you'd stayed asleep a little longer."

Was he seriously saying he wanted to hear my death throes?

"You're the worst. If you knew I was having a nightmare, why the hell didn't you wake me up? Do you get off on watching people suffer? Or are you just into guys moaning?"

"Well, I suppose it depends, but yours were quite entertaining. I don't know what sort of old story you were reliving, but your sleep-talking was all over the place. It was a charming medley of raw, unfiltered truth. Truly music to my ears."

He grinned, looking genuinely satisfied with his meal.

"....."

...Damn it, I couldn't help but stare. Much as I hated to admit it, that smile of his was mesmerising. One of a kind. The kind of smile that could knock any guy out. I hated this asshole, but I loved his smile. Someday, I'd have to sort out that contradiction.

"...Ugh, you're unbearable. You know, one could even say I was being raped for two hours straight. You sadistic jerk, just leaving me to suffer. If you don't want me to sue you, you'd better cough up some hazard pay."

Two hours of downtime at hotel rates—that's what, five thousand yen? ...Wait, is two hours of human dignity worth five thousand yen? Is that expensive or cheap? Probably the former. Kinda hard to slap a price tag on something like that, anyway.

"That's my line. Listen, I've bought your daytime hours. I'm free to use them as I see fit, and you're contractually bound to fulfill your employer's expectations. But you, Arika, hardly give me the time of day. So dissecting your sleep-talking is simply my prerogative for passing the time."

He scoffed and looked away, visibly annoyed.

Passing the time. For Karyou Kaie, that was likely the defining purpose of his existence. He was confined to this room. No, he couldn't even get out of bed unaided. The reason was simple: all four of Kaie's limbs were artificial replicas.

God certainly had a twisted sense of humour. He'd bestowed upon Kaie a face so beautiful it was unfair, yet confined him to a body that was practically a prison.

If I were some B-tier cyborg villain with my one missing arm, then Kaie, missing both pairs of arms and legs, was an evil overlord. My role, as one of his underlings, was to attach his prosthetics in the morning and remove them in the evening.

That alone covered about eighty percent of my living expenses. It was a job even a one-armed guy like me could handle, yet it had this morbid undertone I couldn't quite shake off. Here I was, holed up in a basement on the edge of town, earning off a kid who couldn't even move by himself. It felt worse than freeloading.

Of course, this evil overlord came from serious money, so my paycheck was probably akin to a hobby for him. Kaie wasn't ever going to worry about meals, clothes, or a roof over his head. He even possessed perfectly fitted prosthetics that allowed him a surprising degree of mobility. On my first day, I'd watched him casually stroll to the bathroom on his artificial legs.

But despite the quality of his prosthetics, Kaie rarely used them. Despite how well-crafted they were, something about them just didn't sit right with him. Most days, he just lay in bed like this. Prosthetics were heavy, uncomfortable, and painful, after

all. Today, he seemed particularly unwell—only his left leg and right arm were attached. Which meant—

I glanced toward the corner of the room.

…There it was. A black dog hunkered down, looking like something out of a picture book about devils. Blind since birth, it had never seen the light of day. But don't let that fool you. That dog hunted by borrowing the eyes of others…

"Arika? Come on, are you really okay? You look awful. Maybe you should drink something and calm down?"

"I look just fine, thank you very much. And I'm not interested in your juice-box excuse of a fridge. Not like there's any water or beer inside, is there?"

"Then, how about something to eat? You must be hungry."

"Are you broken or something? Why would I eat when I feel like crap? Besides, you'd charge me for it, wouldn't you?"

"Naturally. Anything you eat or drink will be deducted directly from your compensation."

"See? You're a bully, a heartless cheapskate, and a tyrant who exploits the working class. Whatever, it's daytime anyway. I'll cool off once it's night, so just piss off."

I waved him off dismissively. Not that Kaie *could* chase after me from that bed, so I just slumped back onto the sofa.

The single redeeming quality of this madhouse basement was its sofa. It was ridiculously comfortable—obscenely, even. I was confident I could sleep for three days straight on that thing.

"So, the dream was about Mr. Kizaki, right? The nighttime expulsion you carried out a month ago," Kaie pouted, like I had no right keeping it from him. Honestly, he was being so annoyingly persistent, I felt like pouting, too.

"…Yeah, it was. How'd you know?"

"Well, you were shouting in your sleep. 'Back off, Kizaki! I'll beat the crap outta ya!' you know? Even on the brink of death, you're really something else, Arika," he giggled, the sound echoing like a crescent moon from behind the canopy.

The fact that he knew everything and still sat back to watch me suffer just proved how rotten he really was. Honestly, I ended up in that mess largely because of him. I should've known better. No paycheck in the world was worth that kinda dumpster fire. My creed, my ideal, my personal mantra for a new life was to always take the easiest path. And yet, I'd dug my own grave. That night, I knowingly walked back into a nightmare I'd hoped to leave buried forever.

A family suicide, a man with a twisting neck. I swore I'd never again have anything to do with the epidemic known as Possession.

◇

Agonist Disorder, a condition that apparently gained social recognition about ten years ago. Also dubbed Receptor Crash, it's a psychiatric condition with an acute onset. Regarded as a modern malady, grouped with conditions such as depression and social anxiety, it's likely that only those personally impacted by it have even heard of the term. In short, it's a disorder defined by a complete breakdown in emotional regulation.

You might think, "So what? It's just a fancy label for people cracking under pressure. There's no pathogen or clear cause, so why pretend it's a medical condition?" But don't write it off so lightly. Even depression is a legitimate mental illness. No matter how healthy your body, illness can still take root. If your mind starts slipping out of phase with the world around you, it's not just your psyche that's sick—it's your entire body. Humans are woven from wonder, the arcane, and a rigid design. As such, there's no such thing as a malfunction without a cause.

That said, only professionals regard this as a bona fide illness. The general public refers to the afflicted as the Possessed. Why, you may ask? Because their behaviour is so erratic, it's difficult to attribute it to anything other than devilish influence. Personality changes and a loss of self are just the milder symptoms. More advanced cases spiral into compulsive self-harm, suicidal fixation, and even explosive

violence. Simply put, it's a breeding ground for loose cannons liable to turn violent at the slightest trigger.

"But, you know… isn't that just a run-of-the-mill disorder with flashy symptoms? Why bring devils into it? That's such an outdated notion."

"That's because the concept of possession is easier to digest. To anyone who hasn't experienced it firsthand, depression remains a fairly abstract notion, but everyone can picture someone who's been possessed. And if there's a devil at the wheel, suddenly the erratic behaviour checks out. Acts that seem inhuman? Well, if a devil's pulling the strings, it's possible, right? But frankly, the idea of transferring one's ego to a pseudo-personality through possession has long been discredited. In this country, the masks people wear, their personas, are typically associated with animals. Devils just don't factor into the cultural blueprint."

Indeed, the very concept of Devil Possession originated from foreign folklore. Their devils operated on a one-versus-six-billion scale, with God always holding the upper hand. But here, in this fin de siècle Japan, we only knew devils through monotheistic imports.

"What a shame. They should've called it something like Inugami Possession. That would've hit much closer to home."

"No, no. It's better if it doesn't strike *too* close. Even if religious faith itself has declined, people here are still hardliners when it comes to local culture. That kind of wording tends to strike a nerve. Devil Possession feels detached, like you're watching it through a game. But if it were a homegrown illness, it'd feel too real and boring."

"Ah… so Devil Possession just works better as a buzzword?"

"Precisely. That's why I think the kind of Possession we're seeing now is a genuine modern pathology. People are suppressing so much because they can see the end coming, and yet it never arrives. You don't know when you'll snap. You don't know when the people around you will implode—doesn't that sound reassuring? It's like building a false sense of security, numbing yourself with the idea that you've already braced yourself for ruin. Everyone's chasing that numbness together. That's

the *real* epidemic. The term Devil Possession is simply being used to reinforce that mindset. It's quite the perfect scapegoat."

Self-poisoning, self-generation, self-destruction—was that his point? What a precocious brat. By that logic, Possession was merely a phenomenon, not a disease or anything tangible. Give it a year, and some shinier buzzword would take its place.

But the real issue was that these things weren't just theoretical—they caused real harm. Possessions by devils *did* exist. They transpired in those genuinely mentally ill, in people like Mr. Kizaki, who had sacrificed their humanity for psychic abilities.

Unconventional crimes had been on the rise recently. While the label of Possession was often brought up, only around a hundred had been officially classified as such. That was less than ten percent of all abnormal crimes.

"That's why you mix ten truths into a hundred lies. Soon enough, everything starts to look like a lie."

Couldn't have put it any better. Even if you were unlucky enough to encounter a case like Mr. Kizaki's, as long as the other nine were classified as straightforward abnormal crimes, his would be filed the same way, albeit with a 'suspicious' note attached.

The public recognised Possession while completely misunderstanding its true nature. What kept the label alive wasn't just the afflicted's uncanny behaviour, but also the fact that they exhibited abilities no ordinary humans should possess. Things that should exist only in the realm of delusion, treated on par with mental illness.

In some cases, these abilities crossed the line into the supernatural. Like people who could twist their necks a full 360 degrees and survive—or worse, compel others to do the same. Anyone witnessing that would think, "There's no way they could do that without some kind of devil's power."

Honestly, it's ridiculous. What place do devils have in this overcivilised, end-of-an-era world? I don't buy it. Even after witnessing what seemed like the real deal, I still can't fully swallow it. That kind of thing, even if real, is something no sane person should accept. I still can't bring myself to acknowledge it, and probably never will. Even if a hundred Mr. Kizakis came at me, I'd just laugh it off.

...And yet, I can't dismiss it entirely. There's one reason I can't simply write it off as a lie. And that's because, right in front of me, is a kid who is no mere Possessed. He's the real deal. A genuine devil.

◇

"Hey. Ever wonder what draws the line between real and fake?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Possession. What's the difference between a real Possessed and someone just faking it? Between a regular illness and something... not so regular?"

A month ago. I flashed back to that incident three houses down. My neck still throbbed from a bad night's sleep. How *had* that whole thing ended?

"Hmm... Are you asking if the thing possessing them is real or fake?"

"Nah. I'm done with the devil lectures. I don't care whether these 'devils' everyone talks about are real or not. What I'm asking is, why do people end up Possessed in the first place?"

"Seriously? What a tedious thing to ask. Isn't it obvious? Real or fake, devils always go after the same kind of people. They've always loved preying on the weak-minded."

"Huh? Isn't that backwards? People's minds break *because* they get possessed, right? You're the one who said it was an illness."

"Listen, think about it. Epidemics target people with weak immune systems, right? Those in poor health or with low stamina are more susceptible. It's the same with the mind. Look, you're a good guy, Arika. You hate seeing the weak get picked on just for being weak, but this is one of those things you can't change. Devils only latch onto what's already broken."

He said it with such triumph. What I hated most about him was this—the way he projected his own fantasies onto the personalities of others.

"So what? You're saying they had it coming? That 'weaklings'—people with immature personalities, poor health, or weak constitutions—deserve to get possessed?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying. But it's not that their hearts are inherently weak—it's that their environment was weakened. Even though the mind resides within a person, it's shaped by external factors. Family problems, friendships, societal pressures… if the ground they stand on is poisoned, they're bound to be affected. The result is a sick mind unable to adapt to society. People don't create their environment—their environment moulds *them*. And when they're cracking at the seams, that's when the devil takes hold. The whole concept of devils is about affirming weakness. They thrive on it, nurturing it until it consumes everything. They strip away any sense of societal connection the person had left. Take the cliché of someone who says they can't live without their partner. For most, that's just a defence mechanism against potential heartbreak. But a Possessed would actually kill themselves. 'I'm sad, so I want to die, but I'm scared of dying.' That's how normal people operate. But for them, it's different. 'I can't stand being sad, so I have to die.' They have no fear of the future. The truly terrifying people are the ones who don't care about their past or future—they see only the present."

"…Only the present, huh. Well, there's nothing holding us humans back when we don't have to worry about tomorrow, I guess. If all you have is now, then you can do whatever you want, right?"

In that case, death—a future event—isn't something to fear. The only thing they might fear is their own self in the moment.

"So you're saying their aversion towards death and discontent towards life are the opposite of ours?"

"Exactly. For someone living only in the present, it's like they've just been born. Everything around them feels uncertain, unstable. It's not that they can't control their emotions—it's that people who've been scarred or possessed by these notions can't function unless certain self-imposed terms are met. They won't necessarily crack from emotion alone, but if even one tiny, seemingly trivial rule they've made for themselves is violated, they implode. That's why devils find it so easy to take root in minds already on the verge of collapse."

"…"

What? So they draw these imaginary lines in the sand, and the moment someone crosses them, a devil takes over and starts going on a killing spree? Don't screw with me. If you're going to die, do it alone. Don't drag your friends or family into it.

"That's ridiculous. So it's just a bunch of rejects whining about the fact that they can't adapt to society? Yeah, no, I can't relate to that. How am I supposed to relate to someone who loses it over something so trivial?"

For some reason, the face reflected in the mirror was twisted with loathing. The black dog, sensing something unpleasant, wandered over and curled up at my feet. Day by day, it was getting more attached to me. Damn it.

"Haha, of course you wouldn't get it. You have a normal person's mindset. Look, the point isn't to fault them for having weak hearts—it's about considering *how* they ended up like that. Here's the cliché: 'Don't shame the weakness of a heart that breaks so easily. Instead, understand the tragedy of one who can be undone by something so small.'"

Kaie spoke as if he pitied them, flailing his hands around theatrically from behind the canopy. It was just an act. He didn't have it in him to feel anything as mundane as sadness.

But I still got what he was trying to say. For example, say someone's deathly afraid of tap water, convinced it's poison. They accidentally drink some, and even though nothing happens physically, they still kill themselves.

Calling that weakness is just the arrogance of the strong. After all, *I* wouldn't have the guts to kill myself over something as trivial as that. It's a feeling ordinary people can't comprehend, but couldn't you also say that someone who kills themselves over something so meaningless has an almost fanatical strength of will? Though, that doesn't change the fact that they're socially weak.

◇

Despite the rather pointless conversation, time flew by. Sunset crept in, and the room slowly sank into darkness. There were no lights here, so once the sun went down, it would be pitch black.

Doesn't that just scream romantic? Just the sun and the moon for illumination! Girls eat that kinda shit up. But I'm a guy, so I couldn't care less. My stomach was growling, and I was seriously starting to miss good ol' artificial lighting.

"I'm heading back soon. If I don't get some food in me, I'm gonna drop dead."

My stomach growled loudly, as if my gastric juices were threatening to eat through its lining.

"Huh? Wait, don't tell me you haven't eaten anything since this morning?"

"If I didn't eat in front of you during the day, then yeah. I've been running on empty since last night."

"Whoa, seriously?! That's not good. You're already unhealthy enough as it is. Skipping meals is just asking for trouble. Anyway, I do have some food on me if you're interested. Wanna eat?"

"No thanks. The food here doesn't really sit right with me."

Mainly because of the cost. It's true what they say—if you eat something you're not used to, it'll mess your stomach up.

"What's that supposed to mean? Rude, much? But now that I'm getting a proper look at you, you really *do* look pale. Are you on a diet or something? Or did you hit the bottle too hard and end up with a beer belly?"

"Mind your damn business. The truth is, I'm just flat broke."

I was barely scraping by all year round, but things had gotten especially tight recently. Kaie was dead set on only paying me monthly, which meant no advances or daily wages for me. Haha! Go choke on your silver spoon, you spoiled brat.

"Oh, is that all? If you're out of money, just earn more. All you have to do here is put on and take off my prosthetics. You could pick up a side job during the day, you know?"

"There's no work for me. What kinda grunt job can a one-armed guy even pull off without frying his brains out? Can't even think of anything, can you?"

"I can. There's a job only you can do, Arika. You could expel the Possessed, like you did with Mr. Kizaki. Didn't you get compensated for that?"

"I did, but Ms. Mato confiscated it. Said I wasn't supposed to take cash for volunteer work. Not that it matters. Mr. Kizaki's assets were already knee-deep in debt collectors anyway..."

I remembered now.

Right. After that, I expelled the devil from Mr. Kizaki, the guy with the freakishly rotating neck. He cried and thanked me, saying he wished I'd just killed him instead. And then, with the saddest face in the world, he watched the black dog take care of his lesion.

"...Kaie. Back then, the dog—"

"Oh yeah, that dog-killing Possessed. So you looked into it too?"

"Huh? ...Dog-killing Possessed? What's that?"

"You forgot *already*? Fine, I'll spell it out for the seventh time. Supposedly, someone's been prowling around for about a month now, snatching and slaughtering stray dogs and cats. They gut them, throw away all the innards, and toss the skins in the combustible garbage. At first, it was just a rumour, but that changed about two weeks ago, when people started claiming they'd spotted the perp. They're all passionately arguing that they're Possessed."

"....."

I pulled a memo out of my pocket and checked the date—two weeks ago, the last week of September. The scribbled note, as usual, read, "Nothing special."

"I haven't heard shit about that. A dog killer? Sounds like something from a different century. You don't even see strays in the alleys anymore. They'd all be up in the mountains or the sticks. And you know what? Killing animals up there is just called hunting."

"No, no, not strays—pet dogs and cats. At first, they were just grabbing guard dogs, but now they're breaking into homes to steal pets. Thanks to them, the pet population in Shikura City's taken a nosedive. Quiet nights, huh?"

Now that he mentioned it, that yappy mutt next door that usually barked all night had been quiet yesterday.

"...Huh. So, they caught this guy yet?"

"Nope, still on the loose. The cops have put out a dragnet, but they're not exactly breaking their backs to find him. I mean, it's just dogs and cats, right? But eyewitnesses say this guy's pretty shady. Looks like a real pushover too, so if you bag them, I bet Ms. Mato would toss you a little something. You up for it, Arika?"

"Nope. Hard pass, and Ms. Mato would never toss me a dime no matter what."

Besides, even if this guy *was* Possessed, he hadn't killed any people yet.

"Oh? 'Yet', huh? Spoken like a true former patient. No jumping to conclusions, eh?"

He'd heard me. What kind of ears did this guy even have?

"Knock it off. I don't give a damn about your nonsense. And for the record, I don't have any dog buddies, so I couldn't care less how many mutts bite the dust."

"Wow, harsh. So you're just gonna let it slide, Arika?"

"It's not a human issue, is it? Revenge is for the same species. If you wanna catch him, go find the doggy police or something."

"Wow, you're really digging your heels in. *Boring...* You're being way more bullheaded than usual. With Mr. Kizaki, you were all over it for the cash. Are you hiding something, Arika? Like, maybe you've already met the perp before?"

It was a shot in the dark, but I couldn't exactly deny it. After all, the second least trustworthy person in the world I knew was myself.

I skimmed my memos from the past month. After the incident at Mr. Kizaki's, the only thing even close to noteworthy was:

"Yukio, quit eating so much. Lose weight. And watch the vinegar."

There it was. From about a week ago.

"...Man, even *I* don't get myself sometimes."

Kaie was eyeing me like he wanted a peek at my memo, but this was my secret notebook. Even if he offered me one of those amazing prosthetic arms of his, I

wouldn't show it to him. Not that I wouldn't kill for one of those hands. Hell, I'd sell my soul for 'em.

"So? Do you know him?"

"I said I don't. Lay off me already. And no more of your stupid Possession crap. Save that bull for daylight hours, like now. Got it?"

I put the memo away.

Sunset was half an hour out. Time to wrap up today's work before my timer ran out.

▪▪▪

"Alright, catch you tomorrow morning."

Bidding my usual farewell, I left the basement, making sure to pull the door shut tight behind me. I made my way through the narrow stone passage and climbed the stairs. Four metres or so later, I reached the top and pushed the door open, finally emerging above ground.

I'd surfaced right in the heart of a forest. The sun had already set, and the woods were drowned in an impenetrable darkness.

Kaie's basement was located in this forest, or more accurately, beneath the forest's reservoir. It was surrounded by towering castle walls that stretched endlessly upward. At first glance, it appeared to be a massive concrete cube, roughly ten metres on each side. Weird as it looked, it was actually an emergency reservoir of sorts, so there was a single tall streetlight nearby. Under that cold light, the thing looked more like a spaceship than anything.

You'd think something this strange would be on the city's tourist map, but this reservoir was a secret. Even city hall employees probably didn't know about it. Maybe a couple of crusty old vets at the fire department might remember it as some obscure bit of Shikura City trivia. But even those founts of local knowledge wouldn't suspect

there was a secret room beneath it. The only ones in the know were me, Ms. Mato, and, well, a handful of poor souls who'd had their own run-ins with Possession.

"...Seriously. What *is* that guy?"

I met the master of the basement, Karyou Kaie, two months ago. I'd been on the hunt for a prosthetic arm after being discharged from the hospital. That was when Ms. Mato introduced us, saying Kaie had some peculiar models. I wasn't expecting much, and he'd only agreed to meet me on a whim. And while I didn't walk away with a fresh new arm that day, I wound up taking his offer of a caretaker job since I needed the cash.

We met at night. I remember that basement, just like a fish tank under the bright moonlight. My first impression was the absolute worst. Me, missing my left arm, and Kaie, missing both arms and legs. You'd think two incomplete people might connect, maybe even help each other out—but no, nothing like that happened. There was zero sense of camaraderie. The second I laid eyes on him, I felt sick to my stomach.

Don't get involved with this guy. This creature in front of you is unlike anything you've ever seen.

My blood felt like it was boiling. I mean, he was missing both arms and legs. That had to be rough, right? Just looking at him was exhausting. After getting discharged, my motto had been, "Live as easily as possible." So I didn't want any kind of relationship with someone who'd drain my energy just by being around.

"...And yet, here I am, punching in every day like clockwork. What a damn joke."

Why the hell did I even agree to this? The only reason that came to mind was the fat paycheck. Kaie's offer was hard to refuse. The work was easy, and the pay was good. Just putting on and taking off prosthetics twice a day for 200,000 yen a month? You'd have to be stupid not to take it.

Some heartless underclassman might call it a freeloader's dream, and they wouldn't be wrong. But if I'm being honest? That money felt less like a paycheck and more like a leash around my neck.

◇

After about a ten-minute walk, I reached the road.

The forest wasn't that big, about the size of a university campus, and you could walk around it in an hour. But even after leaving the trees, the lights of civilisation were still a ways off.

More than half of Shikura City was just fields and mountains. No matter how much money they funnelled into the station area, it was still the countryside, two hours from the actual city by express train. Five kilometres from the station, and you were completely swallowed by nature. It was the worst possible environment for modern kids who just wanted to stay inside.

Kaie's room was underground, so there was no cell signal or phone reception. His only link to the outside world was a jet-black rotary dial tucked away somewhere down there.

Speaking of phones, I checked my call log. No messages, no missed calls. The time was exactly 7:00 PM. I'd completely missed the bus. The last one had left the little stop outside the forest at 6:00 PM. Which meant I was in for a five-kilometre slog to Shikura Hills and then another two to the station.

My stomach wasn't going to be happy. Pull it together, city bus. You had one job.

▪▪▪

As expected, going a whole day without food was too much, so I stopped by my usual *izakaya* to fill up. The place was called Dining Bar Seiun[Nebula]. A name that made absolutely no sense for what was basically an Italian restaurant.

The inside was about the size of a college classroom, packed wall-to-wall with tables. It was cramped, chaotic, and reeked of poverty. Out of the forty-odd tables, nearly every single one was taken. The air was thick with booze, smoke, and idle chatter, with customers ranging from high schoolers to thirty-somethings.

And then, right at the eye of the storm, someone lit up the moment they saw me walk through the door.

"...Ugh."

"Ah, it's Senpai! Yoo-hoo! Over here!"

The entire restaurant's attention swivelled toward me and the idiot waving me over. Completely oblivious to the stares, she flailed around like a rag doll and banged on the table like some kind of cryptid. Knowing she'd chase me down if I tried to leave, I resigned myself and took the seat across from her.

Decoration
Disorder

"Geez, Senpai, you're late! Were you at Kaie's again?"

Tsuranui puffed out her cheeks in mock annoyance. She was acting like we'd scheduled this meeting. We hadn't.

"One club sandwich. Drink? Nah, just water."

"You're not even listening! Senpai, it hurts when you ignore me like this!"

"Yeah, yeah. Just don't throw a fit, it pisses me off. I'm listening, okay? Trust me, I'd be ignoring you if I actually had the option."

I shoved Tsuranui's menu, which was taking up the entire table, out of the way and carved out some space for myself. She'd already finished dinner, judging by the spotless plates of pasta, salad, and cake piled around her. Living quite large, huh? Not bad for a student.

"Tsuranui. Let me make this clear: I'm starving to death today. Once I get some food in me, you can yap all you want. Now do me a favour and shut up, okay?"

I silenced Tsuranui with a hand gesture before she could get another word in. If I had to deal with her on an empty stomach, I'd probably keel over.

"Okie-dokie. I'll join you then!"

She flagged down the waiter with way too much gusto for someone who still looked like a schoolgirl.

Tsuranui Mihaya. She'd been a pain in my ass since high school and hadn't changed one bit since. Simply put, she was bubbly, painfully earnest, and pathologically incapable of lying. In other words, the ultimate goody-two-shoes. A real handful.

◇

The cheapest thing on the menu was the club sandwich. On the flip side, the priciest item was the foie gras, which wasn't even that great. The real money-maker for the place was the alcohol, but I was sticking to food today.

"Huh. So Kirisu's been gone since last week?"

Tsuranui Mihaya, the nineteen-year-old with deep pockets, happily munched on her foie gras. She was your textbook modern kid—gets what she wants, eats what she wants, and has zero patience. Turn into a damn pig already.

"Yeah, he's been away. Apparently, some heiress turned Possessed. So he went all the way to Nagano to get her some sorta charm."

Even so, this whole Possession thing sounded like a load of nonsense to me. Could've just been some overblown family drama or a way for her to kill time. Either way, it was a pain for everyone involved, but I'd rather it be fake.

"Honestly, I wanted to tag along too. But you know the rule. Once you've been hospitalised, you can't leave the prefecture. So I sat this one out while Kirisu went off to have fun on his own."

I wasn't about to risk getting shot by Ms. Mato, so I left the fun stuff to my partner.

"Wait, Tsuranui. When did you start handling your booze?"

Tsuranui was chugging wine at an alarming rate. The decanter was practically empty.

"I'm a pro! And, ugh, Senpai, can we please stop with all this Possession crap already? Way to be a buzzkill! Can't we talk about something, I don't know... normal? Otherwise, I might throw up."

Terrifying.

What was terrifying about Tsuranui was that she was the kind of person who went from words to action in the blink of an eye. If she said she was going to throw up, you could bet there'd be a mess in three seconds flat.

"Hold on. Don't throw up, Tsuranui. If we get kicked outta here, all that'll be left is that sad little family diner down the street."

"Then let's talk about something less serious! Ever since you got out of the hospital, it's been nothing but Possession this, Possession that. Can't we talk about stuff that normal people in their early twenties would talk about?"

Hmm, she's got a point. I *have* been a bit of a downer lately. But cut me some slack, Tsuranui. The only things I've had in stock for a while now are tales of other people's misery.

"Don't push it. Besides, talking smack about stressed-out people is basically a worldwide pastime. What's your problem, anyway?"

"Y'know, Possession's all about bottled-up emotions, right? So, like, there's a mighty chance it could happen to *me*! If we keep talking about gloomy stuff, I might spiral and become Possessed too!"

"Not a chance."

If someone like Tsuranui were possessed by a devil, it'd be the end of the world.

"*Hnn*... What a meanie. Not even a second thought. That's the only part of you that hasn't changed at all, Arika-senpai."

Tsuranui pouted, then dove back into her menu. The sheer amount of food she was inhaling had to be at least five times what I'd eaten. Turn into a damn whale already.

"You know, it's honestly impressive how you can shovel all that down while I'm sitting here with just a club sandwich. You sure you're not bulimic or something?"

"Huh? Wait, Senpai, are you still hungry?"

"Starving. This is the only thing I've had all day. There's not even a sad little cabbage waiting for me at home."

Ah, she froze. Tsuranui furrowed her brows, deep in thought.

"Lemme get this straight. You're broke and still want more food?"

"Close. Not just *more*—I want to eat until I'm *full*."

"I see. Hmm, well, depending on how you play your cards, I might consider helping you out. In fact, I'll treat you if you go out with me!"

"I take it back. I'd rather starve to death."

"You're the worst! Come on, why not?! I'm cute, talented, and just one year younger than you! What's not to love?!"

"Nah, the effort outweighs the payoff."

"You're saying that with a straight face too! Ohh, woe is me... Rejected again! Cold-hearted Arika-senpai, as always! But, oh well, that's kinda why I like you! — Excuse me! One double float, please!"

Tsuranui waved her hand energetically. Moments later, a melon float the size of a mop bucket landed on the table, complete with two straws, perfect for couples.

"This time, I'll admit defeat and treat you, Senpai. Go ahead, knock yourself out."

This was just insane. Tsuranui was weird enough, but I doubted the restaurant's sanity for having some bullshit like this on their menu. Actually, the whole place was strange, and the name was just the beginning.

"Tsuranui. You *do* remember I can't handle soft drinks, right? You really think I'm drinking that?"

"Huh? For real? …Well, fine. Let's split the jumbo omelette rice instead."

"Hell no. And knock it off with the whole 'let's share' crap. Splitting one thing between two people isn't how things are supposed to be. I've always hated that kinda thing. Sharing a boiled egg? That's creepier than a cheap slasher flick."

"Huh. But you've done stuff like that before, though?"

"Wait, really?"

Oh no, did I pull some weird stunt again during the day?

"You seriously don't remember? My friend Fusou? We went to her place, received a melon as a souvenir, but couldn't eat it then. So on the way back, you cracked it open on a utility pole and quietly offered me half. Remember that? Ah, the good old days. You used to be *so* much more charming too, Senpai."

I had no memory of that. It was a total blank. When I shut my eyes to try and dig it up, I just heard a sound like gravel crunching underfoot. If it was someone in Tsuranui's circles, it had to be a girl. A souvenir. A visit. Uneaten fruit. Fragments like that always left a rotten taste in my mouth.

"You okay, Senpai? You're looking kinda pale."

"Malnourished too. Anyway, Tsuranui, when was that?"

"When? About four years ago."

Ah, that explained it. I wouldn't remember something from four years ago unless it made a real impression. The idea of sharing a melon now gave me the creeps, but back then, we were just kids. Sharing stuff like that might have been fun.

But more importantly: food. Since I only had one arm, I ate slower than most. Tsuranui, meanwhile, was sulking into her oversized melon float with a sour expression. Serves her right. With any luck, she'd stay quiet till she finished it.

"Oh, right! Look, Senpai, I got a new phone!"

Nope. She couldn't even go a full minute without shoving her brand-new, neon-orange phone in my face. By the way, this was her fourth phone this year alone.

"...Whatever. What's with the highlighter orange? You've got weird taste, you know that?"

"Really? I think it's eye-catching and cute. You don't like it?"

"It's not exactly the kind of colour that screams approachable. ...But I guess it suits you."

"Huh? Senpai, was that a compliment?"

"Yeah, it works out for you. That way you won't have any trouble finding it when you inevitably lose it."

Tsuranui's head drooped with a *thunk*.

...Well, it was definitely flashy, but I'd admit the phone had a certain charm. Something this gaudy could become a treasured possession if you got attached.

"Whatever! Someone as dark as *you* can't appreciate warm colours. Anyway, my number's changed, so update it. Here, I'll send it. *Beep beep*!"

"Got it. I'll sort it out later," I replied, my attention split between the club and my sandwich. "So, did you throw away your old phone?"

"I kept it. Just cancelled the contract. I'm saving them, actually. My dream is to build a robot out of old phones. So with that in mind, can I have yours when you upgrade? It'll be a bittersweet keepsake, like one of those graduation buttons."

"Sure, if I remember."

I didn't get attached to phones anyway. Mine was a four-year-old hand-me-down.

"Yay! Then, as a gift from the ever-adorable Mihaya to her tragically dull Senpai, here's something to spice up your sad little meal!"

Tsuranui, practically vibrating with excitement, shoved her orange phone at me. She seemed to be downloading some image from one of those internet forums.

"Ready? Here we go!"

I leaned in to check the tiny screen. I was a pretty easygoing guy, after all.

The image on the tiny screen flickered to a video.

A nighttime street, vaguely familiar.

One second in—a shrill, yapping dog bark.

Two seconds—a grotesque, melted rubber meatball of a human shambled into view.

Three seconds—the dog's skull was crushed.

Four seconds—it was yanking out the dog's guts.

Five seconds—the video froze. Right on the worst possible frame.

I choked.

"Mhm, shocking indeed. Pretty spicy, don't you think? Ow!"

"Don't show me that kind of crap while I'm eating, dumbass!"

Was she trying to make me throw up the little food I had?

"Really? You didn't like it, Senpai?"

"Absolutely not. You spend *way* too much time online. Someone like you who doesn't know what they're doing should steer clear of that stuff. ...Anyhow, what kinda gore pit did you pull that from?"

"It's not *that* gory! The important bits are all shadowed, so you can't really see anything. Besides, that meatball's so big you can barely even make out the dog."

That's not the point. And put that thing away—the video may be frozen, but I can still hear it.

"Aww. I really thought I could finally do something right for you, so I even sucked it up and joined those creepy people. But even *this* is a no-go? You're impossible."

Tsuranui begrudgingly put her orange phone away. She hated ghost stories but was totally fine with gore. Weirdo. Certified freak.

"But you're curious, aren't you? That was footage of the rumoured Possessed."

"Huh? What're you even on about? I haven't heard any rumours about Possessed recently."

"You know, the one going around bagging, gutting, and chowing down on doggies. You really haven't heard? That's weird—it's been blowing up on the threads for the past three days. They call them Yukio. Ring any bells?"

"Nope. First I'm hearing of it. Care to fill me in?"

Tsuranui gave me the rundown.

Apparently, a month ago, some mysterious person started snatching and killing dogs. Then, someone claiming to have seen them started this rumour about them being Possessed. And, of course, they already had a nickname—Yukio, the dog-killing Possessed.

I pulled out my memo pad and checked.

Oh... crap. I think I've met 'em.

If this leaked to Ms. Mato, I'd be dead meat. *Shudder.*

"Thanks, Tsuranui. That actually helped a lot. If you could keep me posted on sketchy stuff like this after hours, that'd be even better."

"What do you mean, 'stuff like this'?"

"You know... stuff that could get you killed. Actually, don't even meet me during the day anymore. If you've got plans and you don't want me to stand you up, just send me a text. No calls. Now, show me that video again."

"Sure, but you can find it anywhere online. Would look way better on your TV at home."

I watched it again anyway. It was exactly the same.

"It's too dark to make out a damn thing. Did someone just happen to be there filming the whole thing? Man, cellphones these days are starting to scare me."

This sorta tech would spell instant doom for any impulsive criminals in the making. Videos, search logs... the idea of a truly isolated place was practically extinct now.

"No, no, you've got it wrong. The person filming this was gunning for Yukio from the start. They wanted to expose the Possessed so everyone could catch them together."

"...That's some dedication. There's no reward for catching a sick person, you know?"

"It's not really about that. People don't care about money or justice. They just wanna ride the bandwagon while it's trending."

Right. So just another witch hunt.

"Hmm. And you're not into that kinda thing, Tsuranui?"

"I hate it. Entertainment without conviction is just… degenerate."

Wow, she actually said something profound for once.

Tsuranui, of all people, was surprisingly righteous. She couldn't stand thoughtless, self-serving trends. What a commendable girl. I figured I'd walk her home tonight as a reward.

◇

"Heeey, Senpai. What *is* Possession, anyway? People say it's just a glorified name for depression, but does it really make you go around killing dogs?"

Her airheaded question echoed through the deserted night streets.

Tsuranui's apartment was on the edge of the industrial district, the opposite direction from my place. It used to be a bread factory dormitory, so the rent was ridiculously cheap. But the real reason she'd picked it was because of how close it was to her university.

"You're the expert, right? Give me a proper medical explanation. I wanna know the truth. Every time I ask my dad, he just waves it off as some generic mental disorder."

I couldn't tell if she was more upset about her dad brushing her off or just sick of how casually people were tossing around rumours about Possession. Tsuranui, who only knew about it through hearsay, was simply asking the kind of earnest questions any normal person would. But I didn't have any answers for her.

"Beats me. I'll check with someone who might know next time."

"Kaie, right? Well, in that case, give me *your* take on it. Like, why do people suddenly get depressed?"

"Man, having this discussion with a drunk is the last thing I want right now. But, let's see… You ever get this… bad vibe? Like a sense of foreboding, or the feeling something's lurking in the shadows? That's the kind of thing people call the 'root' of Possession."

"Hmm, a bad vibe, huh? Like… awkward situations? Or the tension between us right now?"

"No. I mean when the atmosphere *shifts*. Gets thick, almost like smog. Or you know that feeling when you're walking and suddenly the air feels… wavy, distorted? If you don't notice it and just keep going, you might feel nauseous or depressed later, and you're clueless as to why that is. That's when people snap."

"…Huh. So, these weird, intangible spaces are the root of Possession? Not like when you and Kaie bicker with each other and it's all awkward?"

"No. And for the record, it's always awkward between me and him. Anyway—"

If we were talking about that basement, I knew there was no 'root' of Possession there. The air was too pure, completely sealed off from the outside world—no room for contamination. I'd once praised its beauty to Kaie, but he merely scoffed in denial.

"Beauty isn't simply the absence of ugliness. This place constitutes the whole of my world, and its purity cannot exist outside seclusion. It has never borne the blemish of filth or decay. But that is not beauty; it is merely nihility."

A person isn't complete until they've experienced both good and bad. No matter how pristine, something that's only known purity cannot be human—it can only be something… other.

"Senpai? You're making a scary face. Did I step on a landmine?"

"No, it's just me. Don't worry about it."

As I steered the tipsy Tsuranui along, we passed block after block of looming buildings. Nothing but factories, stacked one after the other, all the way to the horizon. This sprawling industrial complex—a perk of being out in the countryside—probably looked like a military base from above.

"…Oh."

One factory, though, stood out from the rest. It had this strange, almost organic rot to it. The stains on the walls and the rust creeping over the iron fences gave it a distinctly dilapidated look.

"Tsuranui. You know what that factory over there is?"

"Huh? Oh, that's a chicken farm. Went under back in spring."

"A chicken farm… in the middle of an industrial district? Is that supposed to be some kinda metaphor?"

"No, seriously, it's a chicken farm. The place next door makes bread, and there are fields just past that, so it's not that weird. They went bust because of that virus scare, and then they tried to turn it into a canned food factory."

"A canned food factory? Looks pretty run-down for one, if you ask me."

"Can't deny that. Nobody works there anymore. They tried to convert the chicken farm but ran out of cash mid-renovation. The family that owned it… they ended up hanging themselves. Now the place is just waiting for someone desperate enough to buy in."

"Cheery story, eh. By the way, Tsuranui, about that video… You got any clue where it was shot? The original post must have mentioned some kinda location, right?"

"Hmm, well… The video's been reposted so many times, nobody knows who the original poster even was. No one really cares, either. They're just chasing the next viral topic."

"I see. So you don't recognise the place?"

"Nope. Shikura City's huge, and I don't mess around in the back alleys. Do *you* recognise it, Senpai?"

"……"

My head throbbed. You'd think someone living around here would've noticed.

◇

We parted ways in front of her apartment. As a former women's dormitory, the building was off-limits to men. She was still a little tipsy, lips pursed in a half-hearted pout.

"You good? If you're feeling sick, just head back to your room and sleep it off."

"Ugh, I'm not sick. It's just… it's been forever since you walked me home, you know? I'm so happy I probably won't be able to sleep! I might actually die from happiness!"

No need to worry, then.

"Yeah, yeah. Drop dead. And don't stay up all night."

"Kay! Let's eat together tomorrow, Senpai!"

I waited until she'd gone inside before walking off.

Now, then. Just one little detour before heading home.

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Mikishiro Fisheries Shikura Plant Two. That was the name of the abandoned canned food factory. Though 'abandoned' didn't quite cut it, since it had never even really made it off the ground. Was already a ruin from the planning stages. The two factory buildings were completely hollow, akin to empty boxes. Absolutely lifeless. No trace left of the old poultry farm, no sign of the machinery that was supposed to mass-produce tins by the minute.

The real eyesore was the three-storey office building. The windows had been boarded over from the inside with sheets of what resembled plywood. The stains streaking the walls and the thick, stifling air screamed that this place wanted nothing to do with people. It felt like a sealed can housing something best left unremembered.

The front entrance was locked, but the back door was busted, so getting in was easy. Darkness and stale, lukewarm air greeted me. Neither bothered me much—I was used to worse.

My footsteps echoed down the concrete hallway. The overcast sky meant no light filtered through the boarded-up windows. Pure darkness stretched ahead; I couldn't even make out the shape of the hallway. Still, I pressed on without pause. As if I'd walked this place before.

"Tch… I *have* been here during the day."

The deeper I went, the thicker the air became. Likely mould from a busted water pipe. This was the kind of place that would make any sane person think twice, maybe even catch a chill down their spine. But, well, my head wasn't exactly wired right.

A sound mind only resides in a sound body. Sure, it sounds like a load of crap, but it was the undeniable truth, at least for me. Two years ago, after I lost my left arm, I lost the ability to feel threatened.

The body and mind have the same form. Lose a part of the body, and maybe a chunk of your emotions tears loose too. Strangely enough, losing my arm *did* feel like losing a piece of my heart.

Imagine someone who loses their hearing in an accident. Their wounds heal, but their hearing never returns. From then on, they're quick to anger, snapping at the smallest thing. We might call them bitter, but isn't it more accurate to say they've lost the capacity to trust? Losing a part of you physically can mean losing something mentally, too. That's how it went for me, at least.

The bigger the physical loss, the bigger the mental loss. Losing my arm didn't just cost me a hand—it stripped me of my sense of danger, the capacity to feel threatened by external factors. To put it bluntly, I'd become fearless. But it wasn't like I stopped feeling fear. Scary stuff was still scary. It's more like my animal instincts—my defence mechanism—had shut down.

Kaie once said the upside was that animals seem to like me. Said I don't radiate that skittish, self-protective tension. But I'm not exactly stoked about being besties with dogs, sharks, or snakes. Scary things were still scary, even if they didn't register as a threat. Weirdly enough, that made the animals like me *more*. What kind of messed-up logic is that?

Beep beep beep. My phone alarm sliced through the darkness.

"Right. Time's up. Gotta go."

Knowing when to bail was crucial. I was just feeding a bit of morbid curiosity, anyway. When your internal brakes were shot, even the dumbest impulses could nudge you over the edge. Without those little warning bells—*this is bad, stop, danger*—people like me just barrelled into trouble.

That's why I had strict rules. This time, it was five minutes. Five minutes, and I was out, no matter what.

I slipped out of that husk of a factory clean without incident. If I hadn't, Shikura City'd be spinning a fresh urban legend by sunrise. But poking a bush and getting bitten by a snake wasn't my idea of fun. Of course, the smart thing would've been to stay away in the first place. Which is exactly why I need my rules to keep me in check.

"...Eh, this town's already crawling with ghost stories. One or two more haunted broilers won't make a difference."

True enough. There were already plenty of creepy tales—the massacred mansion family, the ghost train in the subway, and the housing complex of delusions that supposedly swallowed tenants whole. Ignoring a couple of potential hauntings wasn't going to curse me.

The only thing gnawing at me was how close this place was to Tsuranui's. But I could warn her first thing tomorrow. That'd be enough. Time to head back.

My impulsive curiosity had been sated, and I wanted nothing to do with this Possessed. Getting involved would mean taking on responsibility, dragging sins I'd rather keep buried into the light. My hands were plenty full just trying to keep myself standing. And with my messed-up sense of justice, I couldn't afford to shoulder the burdens of others.

I was one arm short, and I wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. A weakling like me, trapped in limbo, had no choice but to live without sticking my head into other people's problems. And that's because, well... when things got tough, no one would be there to help me, would they?

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It all started because I couldn't find a prosthetic that suited me. No injuries, no aftereffects, no explanation—my left arm had just vanished into thin air. They said it was as if I was born without it. And my body refused to cooperate with every prosthetic I tried.

Not that they didn't function, mind you. They were being outright rejected by my body. And it wasn't just the fancy high-tech ones that respond to muscle signals. Even the dummy limbs, the window-dressing types meant to just sit pretty, were a no-go. The messed-up part was that every time I tried to wear one, my phantom left arm would start to ache.

The doctors chalked it up to a psychosomatic symptom, claiming I was subconsciously refusing to accept my new reality, clinging to some delusional sense of wholeness. So every time I reached for a replacement, my brain punched back with pain.

Sure, it made sense, but that didn't exactly do me any good. Whether I was in denial or not, I still needed an arm. Even if it was just for appearances, not having both upper limbs made me feel… off.

During my stint in the hospital, I tried every prosthetic they had. Turns out, I had some kind of material sensitivity. The pain varied—sometimes unbearable, other times nauseating, and one time I even blacked out. But there was definitely a pattern.

So, I figured if I kept searching, I'd eventually find one that worked. I continued my hunt until it eventually led me to Kaie's basement.

The second that brat saw me, he went, "Ah. That arm of yours—it's been taken by a fake, hasn't it?" Then he showed off what he claimed was the only prosthetic in the world that would fit me.

"You may have lost your arm," he said, "but the link remains. As long as it still exists somewhere, you won't be able to attach a new one."

Even though my lost arm had lost its form, Kaie was convinced it still existed in some abstract, conceptual way. "After all," he added, "you don't even *miss* your left arm, do you?"

That one *landed*. It was the first real psychological blow I'd taken since losing my arm. Because he was right. I didn't *want* it back. To me, that arm had always felt like it was never there. So, even without the physical form, the inherent nothingness remained unaltered.

"Only the sensation yet lives," he continued. "A conventional prosthetic would be like stitching fabric to your nerves. No wonder it nauseates you enough to knock you out."

Yeah. Even though the arm was gone, the sensation lingered. It was all in my head. If I closed my eyes, my brain could still recognise my left arm, move it, even grasp things—just like it used to.

But of course, it was all an illusion. Though existence may flow into nothingness, nothingness can never conjure existence. Nothingness, as a sensation, knows only its own kind. A touch devoid of form. For it is nothing, it cannot seize what *is*. But precisely because it *is* formless, it can blend with that which is of the same nature. And that's why—

"Only an imaginary sense of touch can host imaginary horrors. Brilliant, Ishizue Arika. Your left arm is the ideal devil—"

What was it that smug little bastard called it again?

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The next morning, October 10th. The sky was overcast, just like the day before. And according to the forecast, it was going to stay that way.

I dressed and headed for the woods on the edge of town. That kid was a deep sleeper, so I figured I'd be fine if I got there by ten. It was just before nine, plenty of cushion unless something went off the rails.

Leaving the residential area behind, I tried calling Tsuranui. No answer. Still asleep, huh?

After the tone, leave a message and some love, please!

Seriously?

"Hey, it's Ishizue. Just a heads-up about that Yukio guy. You've got a talent for walking into fires, so do yourself a favour and stay clear. Also, for the love of God, change your voicemail. You sound like an idiot."

I left the message, a reminder about last night, and left the manicured rows of houses behind. Fields stretched out, gentle hills lined the horizon, and a wide, mostly deserted highway lay ahead. The same old countryside that hadn't aged a day in twenty years.

"...Ugh."

I'd noticed a group that didn't fit. Two police cars, an ambulance, and a bright red Volvo—clearly way outside your average Joe's price range. An S40 series, no less. Wicked sick. A group I hoped to avoid, and someone I both anticipated and dreaded seeing.

Instinctively, I ducked out of sight, slipping off the road and into the grass to observe. Something bad go down? Oddly, there weren't many rubberneckers, and I didn't see any forensics crawling the site. It seemed they'd already wrapped things up. The cleanup was underway, so if I stayed hidden a little longer, they'd probably leave—yeah, right.

The woman posted up against the Volvo snapped her fingers at two officers. The two brick-wall cops beelined straight for me, no questions asked, and hauled me up to the Volvo like I'd been caught red-handed. Hauled and tossed. So much for human rights, really.

"Alright, thanks for coming along willingly."

Classic Ms. Mato. So *that's* what they call a voluntary escort these days!

"Oh, you two can head out. I need a word with this one."

The two stone-faced officers saluted and quickly departed.

Now it was just me, the Volvo, and the woman in the black suit. Beautiful, yes, but Touma Mato was no cop. She was the cold-blooded beast who'd been shadowing me for the past two years. My internal nickname for her was Tomato.

Decoration Disorder

"Oi, scumbag. Planning on getting up anytime today?"

Tomato spat the words with disdain. Even without the slurs, the sheer venom in her tone was enough to ice my spine—and this was her playing nice, mind you. If I ever dared call her Tomato out loud, I'd be in for a world of pain. So, I kept the cute nickname to myself and stuck with Ms. Mato.

"Morning. Thought I did a decent job staying out of sight, but you sniffed me out right away, huh? Sharp eyes for this early, Ms. Mato."

"Shozai.[1] You really don't get it, do you? A white-haired, one-armed kid might as well have a target on his back. ...Good God. Don't pull this kind of crap in public. If anyone so much as deems you suspicious, you're headed straight for the slammer. Only reason you're not in a cell right now is because I stepped in for you."

"Wait, so that whole 'escort' thing was you covering for me?"

"Obviously. I'm your presiding officer. I don't have the time to drag myself down to some holding cell over some trivial stunt. Trash like you should stay holed up in your room and not cause trouble."

Ms. Mato was on point as usual: cool, stunning, and stylish as hell, cruising up in her cherry-red ride. As a special agent with the Public Security Bureau, she was practically untouchable in Shikura City. Only the police superintendent, who conveniently doubled as the chief of Shikura's police department, could challenge her authority. Word on the street was she held the rank of de facto inspector, which explained how she could order around officers like she did.

For someone in her twenties, she was on the fast track to the top, yet she clearly wasn't satisfied. Her ambition was tenfold that of a normal person. Compared to me, she was practically an evil superhuman, a thousand times more driven. And at her core, she was a sadist who enjoyed tormenting the weak.

"*Sigh*. Wipe that arrogant grin off your face before I do it *for* you. It feels like I'm being mocked by an animal at the zoo. Frankly, it's insulting."

"Oh, come on, this is just how I was born. I'm more interested in what happened here. I take this road often, so I've got a stake in it."

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[1] Shozai is the more standard reading of Arika's name in Japanese Kanji. Both words mean whereabouts or location, but Arika has a more literary, existential nuance.

"What do you think? My presence should speak for itself. We brought in a patient showing early onset. They were under home care but slipped out this morning. Their parents reported it, and we apprehended them here."

'Brought in' was putting it mildly. It was more like a forced apprehension. Agonist Disorder—commonly known as Possession. Ms. Mato's real job was overseeing agents in the security bureau assigned to monitor these cases. With a moniker befitting their line of work, they were publicly known as the Hearse Agency—modern-day priests in suits, tasked with salvaging the Possessed. That said, they weren't exactly known for respecting human rights.

"Yikes. Sounds like a hell of a morning, Ms. Mato."

"Tell me about it. Police work like this shouldn't even be on my desk. The kid's not Possessed, just your average nutjob."

She brushed it off with an irritated sigh.

While the public often mistook Possession for a new form of depression, anyone who'd seen the real thing firsthand could tell the difference instantly. In severe cases, the symptoms weren't just mental—they manifested physically. It wasn't just a psychological scar; it was a full-blown physiological affliction. But only those directly involved knew that: the Possessed, the ones they attacked, and the ones who stood between them. Ms. Mato belonged to the largest group—the protectors. When it came to Possession, she was far more knowledgeable than I could ever hope to be.

"So, you're saying it's just a regular mental illness? Are we really seeing that many people faking Possession these days?"

"Tons. And thanks to them, my workload's doubled. At this rate, I'll be cleaning up this mess for another two years. I volunteered for this gig because they said it'd only take a year, but I was clearly lied to."

Ms. Mato preferred to look down on the world from a position of authority, so fieldwork probably wasn't her thing. But she loved guns. Once, after a few drinks, she confessed her dream was to have a shooting range in her office. Seriously terrifying.

"Anyway, small fry like them don't deserve any of our time. Never mind that, Shozai. You heard about the Possessed making the rounds in rumours?"

"You mean the dog killer? Yeah, I heard about him last night. Apparently, he's been catching cats and dogs and eating them."

"....."

Oh. Ms. Mato was giving me that cold, scrutinising look. ...This was bad. Did she figure out I was hiding something?

"Shozai. I've said it before, but people like you make my skin crawl."

"Obviously. If you said you liked *us*, I'd have to crown you Queen of the Freaks."

"Listen carefully. What I'm saying is that societal deadweights like you just drag everyone down. Got it? You so much as try to play coy, and you'll be saying hello to the nurses that same minute. You may not be Possessed, but you aren't too far off either. That condition of yours isn't something you can expect to live an ordinary life with. If anything, locking you up would be doing you a favour."

"Ouch. I'm doing just fine without a left arm, thanks. C'mon, haven't I been useful?"

"...Hmph. Fine. You keep your story straight, don't leave anything out, and I'll let you off the hook. Anyway, back to business. The real target's our dog killer. Like you said, the perp's been snatching up strays, butchering them, and cooking them up on the spot. And 'cooking' is putting it nicely—they're practically eating them fresh off the bone. Here are some photos from the scene."

She pulled some files from her car and handed them over nonchalantly. I knew I was merely a pawn in all this, but it was nice to feel a sliver of trust from her. I mean, she's absolutely stunning. But holy crap... these photos were something else.

"Uh, Ms. Mato. This just looks like vomit."

"Call it regurgitated matter, jackass. I understand how you feel, but get yourself familiar with all of it."

As I reluctantly flipped through the photos with her, her face twisted in disgust. Weirdly enough, she actually resembled a beautiful, mature lady when she made that face. What a waste.

"Wait. Is the floor... melting?"

"Sure is. According to forensics, it's from highly corrosive gastric acid. Hahaha, those guys are something else."

Well, I'd already seen a guy twist his neck all the way around, so at this point, nothing really fazed me anymore.

"...But seriously, it's all just vomit. What's the story there?"

"Pretty much what it looks like. They eat the dogs, then throw them up."

"Huh? I guess dogs must not taste too good."

"Idiot. You think they'd keep doing it for a whole month if they tasted bad? They eat them on purpose, then throw them up on purpose. They know what's coming and go through with it anyway."

They ate, then threw up. Whatever went in came right back up. I felt like I'd seen a similar disease before.

"Knowing you, you've probably already looked into this, right? They're calling this Possessed 'Yukio' online. Do we have them IDed yet? Oh, and do we know what caused their Possession?"

"Hm? Oh, you already know their name?"

"Heard it from Tsuranui. So, who *is* he?"

"The name's Fusou Yukio, from Takanodai in Shikura City. They've been on home care for the past four years but went missing about a month back. Their parents haven't responded to inquiries. According to their mother, she'd prefer they just disappear."

"I see. What kind of home care?"

"Not sure if it's related, but they've been anorexic since middle school. Need a rundown?"

"No need. I'm familiar."

Anorexia. A modern illness rooted in psychological issues that renders eating impossible—or, more precisely, leads to a chronic inability to retain ingested food. While it's often reduced to just fasting, the reality usually involves a loop of bingeing and purging. It starts psychologically—eating, then forcing oneself to vomit. But over time, the stomach weakens, reflexes hardwire the response, and even if the psychological cause fades, the physical compulsion lingers on. Anorexics struggle to

get proper nutrition, so even low-effort routine tasks, like climbing stairs, can prove to be extremely exhausting.

What's truly insidious is how unaware they often are of how far gone they are. They may appear healthy, but their bodies are steadily deteriorating. As their stamina decreases, so does their immunity, and even a minor cold can escalate to starvation and death. Anorexia is not a condition that can be overcome alone. Without self-awareness and proper external support, it can even prove to be fatal.

"That doesn't sound right. From what I heard, Yukio's actually overweight. Ms. Mato, have you seen the videos circulating online?"

"No, I haven't. ...Wait, what? There are videos of the dog killer?!"

"Sure are. They're blowing up on these anonymous boards. You'll see a naked, bloated guy who looks... kinda tasty, in a greasy, deep-fried sort of way."

"Right. That checks out. Forensics reports they're consuming about five times the amount they regurgitate. That's around sixty kilos a day. Give it two weeks, and they'll be nothing but a walking meat sack."

Sixty kilos a day?! That was like two whole dogs. No wonder he was gaining weight. Honestly, with how much Ms. Mato loved her meat, I wouldn't be surprised if she was low-key jealous deep down.

"But the feeding frenzy stopped a week ago. No new cases in the past seven days. They weren't careful enough. Strays are nearly extinct now, people are keeping their pets locked up, and we've got boots on every corner. They can't exactly waltz in for a snack anymore."

"Well, it was bound to happen after going wild for so long. So, Yukio hasn't eaten in a week?"

"Yeah. Worst case, they might've starved to death by now."

Ms. Mato actually sounded concerned. Kinda comforting, hearing that from her. Guess she *did* have some sense of justice buried deep down in her.

"That's good. So, starvation's off the table, huh?"

"Of course. Remember, this *is* an illness we're talking about. If I don't handle this carefully, it's my neck on the line. Besides, it's a pain when they die in some

corner—cleaning up after a cockroach behind a cabinet is a nightmare. If I'm gonna put them down, I'd rather do it properly, in broad daylight."

Scratch that. This woman didn't have a drop of justice in her.

"Um, Ms. Mato. Shooting a patient in broad daylight might, y'know, put a dent in your career."

"Relax. I'll just stack on a few extra charges. Once they've killed someone, they're not a patient anymore—they're a murderer. And if the target's a criminal, I can wiggle out of it."

Haha, Ms. Mato… terrifying. Who signed off on giving this woman state credentials, let alone black-market firepower?

"That's all. Shozai, you're heading to that kid's place, right? Get his take while you're there."

She shoved a police-issue vomit catalogue and forensic reports at me, already heading back to her Volvo.

"Why don't you ask him yourself? He'd be thrilled to see you."

Honestly, he'd probably tag her as his next target. I'd pay good money to see Kaie push her buttons for once.

"That kid gives me the creeps. There's something seriously off about him. It's only due to your lack of fear that you can handle that atmosphere. I'll give you credit for that much. You were always fair to everyone at the hospital, too."

The engine coughed to life. Didn't seem like Ms. Mato was going to wait for a reply.

"Fine, I get it. I'll go myself. All I have to do is ask, right?"

"What the hell are you even talking about? You think I'm here because I wanted to chat? I'm telling you to earn your keep. These bastards are *your* people, aren't they? Now, before that dog killer strikes again, find their hideout."

"Tall task. They haven't eaten for a week, right?"

"If they only ate dogs, then yeah."

"Think they're on edge?"

"I'd be starving."

"Does that mean I'm going to be their first victim?"

"That's not a problem. Just one less body to deal with. The dog killer levels up to murderer status, and we cross a future Possessed off the list. Sounds like a win-win to me."

A tyrant. The Tomato Tyrant had struck again.

"No way. Why do *I* have to play babysitter for some rando Possessed?"

"Up to you. But say no, and your sister's verdict gets turned over."

"I'm on it!"

Instant compliance. Instant motivation. Instant terror.

A loose, murderous Possessed was a far greater threat.

"Good. I want them bagged *today,* understood? You already know where to look, don't you?"

"Ugh."

She'd seen right through me.

Ms. Mato buckled her seatbelt, yanked the wheel, and sped off at eighty kilometres an hour through the countryside.

◇

"Whoa, so *this* is the infamous dog-killing Possessed."

Kaie's eyes lit up as he pored over the documents.

Not wanting to get dragged into whatever twisted excitement he was brewing, I flopped onto the sofa and stared up at the grey sea overhead. It was calm overhead, thankfully. No sign of that damn shark today. The only sound was the rustle of paper as Kaie flipped through the files.

Just him and me in the basement. Kaie had all his prosthetics on—both arms and legs, sleek and black. Someone who didn't know better might assume he just had silk bandages wrapped around his limbs.

"Wow, so it really was their staple food. As a dog lover, I can't forgive this! Consuming canines is practically asking for parasites to eat you from the inside!"

He was in an unusually chipper mood. That high-pitched giggle of his always sent a chill down my spine.

"Sixty kilos a day? That's insane! Hey, Arika, check this out! A cop on patrol opened fire on the suspect! Can you believe it? The report says he was in an extreme state of confusion and couldn't think straight. Wow, I wonder what sort of horrific, inhumane creature he saw."

"Yeah, I caught that on the way here. Wild stuff, really. Five shots from a .38 S&W is usually a death sentence. Heck, even one shot would do it."

Apparently, the cop stumbled on Yukio mid-meal about a week ago, and that's when the incident occurred. Yukio fled and hadn't been seen since. It's unknown whether he was wounded, but the way he'd been lying low this past week suggested he was shaken by the shooting. Being shot at unexpectedly can't have been a pleasant experience.

"Let's see... 'Note: Metal fragments, presumed to be bullet remnants, were recovered at the scene. The rounds had been corroded by a potent acid, likely secreted through the subject's skin.' Ew, this Possessed is like a giant toad!"

He was probably thinking of toad oil. For a kid, he sure liked his old-fashioned metaphors.

"But this makes things clear. The stomach's the lesion, and dissolution is the mutation. We don't have the root cause yet, but it's a solid lead. A Possessed soaked in gastric acid, huh? If it can dissolve bullets, hand-to-hand and melee weapons aren't gonna cut it. Wonder what their play is... they can't even net it... Wow, Ms. Mato's on it. She put in a request for a flamethrower. Haha, denied. So then she pivoted to targeting the respiratory system, but nerve agents are usually hit-or-miss with Possessed... Oh, waterboarding? And she's got a fire truck lined up. That's... incredibly thorough. Hey, Arika, is she *actually* a doctor?"

I'd like to know that myself. Last time I saw her at the hospital, she was drenched in blood, white coat and all, casually swinging around a chainsaw. Not exactly the best time to hit her with, "Excuse me, are you a doctor?" And the first time we met, she was unloading on my sister with twin handguns.

It's ironic, though. No matter how much a Possessed lost their humanity, it was always humans who were the strongest in the end. No matter how deranged the crime, a well-armed, disciplined police force could shut any disturbance down.

"Well, you could argue that Ms. Mato's the true inhuman freak here. And that same freak is being extra cautious this time around. Normally, she only trusts what's in her own holsters for the job."

"That just goes to show how far gone this one really is. Pretty impressive for someone possessed by a fake. It's frustrating, but even a real devil couldn't warp someone this much. Maybe it *is* the end of the world. At this rate, reality might actually lose to fantasy."

Kaie laughed, his bloodlust hanging in the air like an unsheathed blade. …Great. Ms. Mato was already running hot, and now he was getting fired up too.

Karyou Kaie was obsessed with the distinction between real and fake, and he probably had a visceral hatred for anything that fell into the latter. For the boy with artificial limbs, 'fakes' were likely the diseases[Possessed] of reality, while 'real' referred to the devils of fantasy.

I found myself drifting back to a pointless memory—the night Kaie explained the difference between reality and fantasy. The same night he handed me his prosthetic arm.

◇

Possession is a disease—cause unknown, cure nonexistent. A mysterious affliction that fractures the mind and grotesquely warps the flesh, as though the handiwork of some devil. But its underlying mechanism has been understood from the start. The human nervous system relies on proteins known as receptors. Neurotransmitters, a type of ligand, are released into the synaptic cleft and bind to these receptors, catalysing new emotional and cognitive stimuli.

"Think of it this way. The body carries out the brain's orders, but it's the receptors that record the fallout and send it back to the brain."

The results of every action: Injury registers as pain, fear, and hatred. Nourishment brings feelings of deliciousness, happiness, and a desire for more.

Humans, as living beings, are constantly generating new emotions. Kaie found that beautiful—how one could swing from joy to despair simply by waking.

Receptors influence everything from cell division and growth to higher-level functions like emotion. They are, in essence, the keyholes to human growth and transformation. And Possession is the catch-all term for any human whose brain receptors have malfunctioned.

"Humans function on weak electrical currents, and emotions are just chemical reactions. So with that in mind, wouldn't you expect stronger emotions to generate stronger currents? Humans are both digital and analogue—no, they're poetic. Romantic, even. When you're sunk in deep despair or gut-wrenching grief, you're literally running lightning through your own body."

If you imagine devils as viruses, then human emotions are what they feed off of. These extreme emotions, accumulated negativities, become their breeding ground. The mature 'devil virus' then wreaks havoc on the system. Normally, neurotransmitters latch onto receptors to transmit information to the brain. But in Possessed, emotional overload triggers erratic chemical surges that overwhelm the system, ultimately damaging the receptors.

This is similar to how agonists—chemicals that stimulate receptors, sometimes acting like deadly neurotoxins—bind to them. What are usually benign neurotransmitters turn toxic when secreted abnormally, acting as agonists and ravaging the receptors and distorting the human form.

And the source of this toxin? Emotion. To mitigate the cause of its suffering, the body's receptors reconfigure themselves to resolve the problem.

Thus, creating an entirely new bodily function to address it. This is known as Agonist Disorder—a psychosomatic mutation born from dysregulated neurotransmitter activity and cellular overdrive.

"Humans are like products. Add new components, and they gain new functions. But, you know... if a lizard grows wings, it becomes a dragon, right? As

much as its form is still that of a lizard, a single new component makes it a different creature in its entirety."

Severe Possession transforms not just the mind but the body as well. Three core signatures define it: the lesion that abnormally secretes agonists, the resulting mutation, and the rampant emotions that lit the fuse on the lesion in the first place.

Anyone exhibiting all three is no longer human. Like Mr. Kizaki and Yukio, they've long lost their structure as humans. It's like a gene-destroying virus. At that point, it barely seems related to devils at all. The real thing, sitting before me, chuckled.

"Precisely. It's a devilish genetic disorder masquerading as a stairway to godhood. A miraculous affliction born from the dreams of man that grants them immortality and superhuman faculties. But don't get things backwards, Arika. Possession isn't something that happens spontaneously. Devils wouldn't exist without humans to nurture them. They're like secondary malignancies that only metastasise as the result of a toxic environment and a wounded mind."

That's what makes it a disease. Not terminal in the conventional sense, but a parasitic, unconscious, and voracious life that survives by cannibalising the sickness itself. A cutting-edge epidemic, symbolising the erosion of the individual and the very nature of human existence…

◇

"So, what's the plan, Arika? Ms. Mato told you to get to work, right?"

"Yeah, she dropped a bomb on me. If I don't play along, she's cutting my sister loose."

"Yikes."

Kaie offered a silent prayer of condolence. Those silent prayers aren't a joke, so seriously, knock it off.

"But you don't seem particularly invested, Arika. You were totally indifferent yesterday. A far cry from the person who handled the entire Kizaki case solo."

I wasn't sure myself. I just had a vague feeling that this case was different.

"Oh, I get it. You're cut from the same cloth as Ms. Mato, after all. You'll look the other way as long as this Possessed hasn't drawn blood."

A crescent moon curled like a grin in the shadows of the canopy.

"Huh? No, that's not it at all. Ms. Mato's just waiting for a victim to drop so that she can move in, while I'm not getting involved unless someone dies—"

Oh. Wait, that *is* the same thing. Crap, I can't talk about her like that.

"No, no, wait a minute, it's not that simple. ...It's just, this time, there's no malice, you know? Like, he's not killing dogs out of spite. He's after what's *inside* them."

Right. It comes down to intent.

Possessed, driven by hatred or affection, weaponise their powers deliberately to carry out crimes. But those who develop the condition from primal emotions, on the other hand, wield their power simply to survive. There's sin, but no real punishment. If we stopped to punish every little transgression, society would collapse.

"Hmm. So, you're saying Possessed who don't abuse their powers are just victims? Just trying to survive, so that makes it fine? Do you really think that's the case, Arika? Have you considered why dogs, of all things?"

"Well..."

The reason he was hunting and eating dogs was pretty straightforward. Yukio couldn't get a hold of normal food. With that body, he couldn't exactly stroll into a grocery store. And he was probably broke anyway.

"Even though they're breaking into houses and stealing dogs? There's gotta be food in their fridges. Why go for the family pet instead of just raiding the groceries?"

"Well, that's..."

It wasn't that he *couldn't* get regular food. It was that he was no longer *interested* in it.

"That's right. Ordinary food can't sate their hunger anymore. They've probably exhausted every other option, and the only outliers left are dogs and cats. Arika, you know any butchers around here that deal in dog meat?"

"Nah. Can't imagine there's even a market for it."

"See? If it's not commercially available, they're forced to procure it on their own. Luckily, dogs and cats are easy to come by."

"Question. Why not birds or fish?"

"They could, but it would be pointless. Fish and poultry are sold everywhere, right? They've probably had all that at a regular dinner table before becoming Possessed."

Oh, right. I ate fish too.

"So, it's not that there are only dogs to eat, but that he's eating them because he wants to?"

"Exactly. If I had to guess, I'd say they're in the midst of experimentation. Now, here's the million-dollar question: What do you think our anorexic, bulimic Possessed will turn to once the novelty of dogs fades away?"

He chuckled like some doomsday prophet, already resigned to the predetermined outcome.

"....."

Whether driven by rationality or instinct, the result would be the same. A human possessed by a devil, whether acting maliciously or not, was bound to poison society. If his reason for eating dogs was mere 'curiosity,' the next item on the menu was easy to guess. The city was packed with far richer sources of protein. Shikura City's population was, what, 150,000?

"He's going to start hunting people?"

"Not much else that fits the bill, is there?"

"Cause they're tastier?"

"Huh? No, I don't really think it's about the flavour. But the moment they cross that threshold, there's no coming back. Once it becomes a murder case, Ms. Mato will show them no mercy. And when she's serious, that fake won't stand a chance."

I got to my feet. I wasn't exactly sold on Kaie's theory, but I figured I'd check it out before the day wrapped. The canned food factory was less than an hour on foot. Perfect way to kill some time.

"I'm heading out for a bit. Be back by evening."

"Oh, you sure? Want me to lend you my left arm?"

"Nah. I was just told to track him down. Nobody asked me to expel anything."

"Huh, so all it takes is a request? How about *I* ask you?"

"Beat it, brat. I don't feel any sincerity from you."

◇

The sea overhead faded into an ashen sky. Finally out of that madhouse basement, I drew in a lungful of fresh air, trying to clear my head. My phone showed it was past 1 PM. I'd been locked in that back-and-forth with Kaie for nearly two hours. There was also a missed call. A voicemail from Tsuranui. I braced myself and hit play.

"Hey, Senpai. It's Mihaya. So, about that vid from yesterday… I think I pinned down the location. I mean, it just kinda clicked on my way to work."

She'd figured it out faster than I expected. Then again, being fed subliminals day in, day out, was bound to pay off eventually.

"A-Anyway, I skipped class to stake out the place, and I *just* saw Yukio. You told me not to get *too* involved, so I'm just gonna drop them some food. They look… well, they look scary, and rough, but they also look like they're hurting, and I just… I can't just leave them be."

The message ended.

Crap. I felt a wave of dizziness. I should have told her not to get involved, *period.*

That message was from an hour ago. No updates since.

I dialled her number. No answer. The hopeless ringing just looped endlessly.

"……"

Call after call went unanswered. I gripped my phone tightly, on the verge of crushing it.

Crack. The screen splintered.

Great. Just great. Guess I'd be handing off the busted one to Tsuranui and shelling out for a new one, after all.

"Oh, it connected."

The ringing cut off, but there was only silence. A silence that stretched on longer than the ring. Then came ragged, laboured breathing through the speaker. I tried to imagine what was happening on the other end. Who had Tsuranui's phone now?

"Is this… Yukio?"

My voice was colder than I intended.

No response.

Just as I was about to give up,

"Helb mee, Senbaai…"

A scorched, raspy woman's voice crackled through, before the line went dead.

"Hey!"

I redialled. Nothing but the hollow loop of ringing. Whoever had Tsuranui's phone wasn't looking for conversation.

Electricity shot through my body, and my mind went blank. Almost reflexively, I slammed my fist against the reservoir wall and turned back toward the basement.

◇

"Oh, forgot something?"

"Yeah. Lend me your arm."

"I don't think I asked you for anything, though?"

"Changed my mind. This nasty sound's glued itself to my ears."

Kaie's eyes lit up with a strange, almost triumphant gleam, like someone who'd finally cornered an enemy they'd loathed for years.

"Isn't it marvellous, Arika? Humans aren't absolute like gods. You can rise one morning hating something, and by nightfall, adore it. You're reborn every second."

Save the philosophy. Just give me the arm.

"Here, take good care of it."

I took the black, plaster-like left arm. Now, I just needed a blade. A kitchen knife would've been ideal, but the best I could scrounge was a fruit knife. It'd have to do.

"Huh? Why the knife? The Possessed melts bullets on contact. I doubt a blade will be much use."

"It's for self-defence, just in case. Well, I'm off."

"Take care, Arika. It's been some time since your last stroll, after all."

From somewhere within the shadows, the dark figure snickered. Clutching the arm tight in my right hand, I climbed out of the basement.

◇

Stepping onto the highway, I caught sight of a bus I didn't recognise idling at the stop. Its sheer convenience rubbed me the wrong way, but I figured I might as well make the most of it. Boarding it, I rang up Ms. Mato.

"Ishizue here. I'm heading to that Possessed's nest—Yukio, right? Can you get a patrol moving? It's about a twenty-minute drive from here, and I'd like them secured as soon as possible. Huh? No can do? You can't mobilise without solid evidence? Figures. Fine."

Ms. Mato was apparently the only one who'd indulge my sketchy intel. Grateful as I was, she could be surprisingly useless sometimes. Big shot on the surface, but I had a feeling she was knee-deep in some internal faction politics.

"Oh, you'll send a local officer? No, that's a terrible idea. They'd get creamed. I'd rather handle this myself. Where are you, anyway? Huh? Eating ice cream on the Aqua Line? Unbelievable. What are you even *doing* out there?"

Things just kept getting worse. Even if Ms. Mato was a speed demon, it'd still be a solid hour and a half from the Aqua Line to Shikura City. I'd most likely beat her to it.

"Okay, I'm going in first. Gonna need some backup if things go sideways. Location's in the Shikura industrial district. I'll text you the address—get here as fast as you can."

I hung up.

The prosthetic arm was still lying on the floor, waiting for its moment to spring to life. The bus sped through the countryside, doing thirty over the limit.

...Well then. Much as I hated to admit it, I now had a reason I couldn't ignore. No mercy, no excuses. Time for expulsion number three.

▪▪▪

The factory greeted my return with a chilling embrace. The air hung heavy, thick with the stillness of death. Faded blue paint sloughed off the walls in brittle curls. It was a deserted ruin, a place that felt like the world's end. The only difference from last night was the daylight outside, but inside, the atmosphere remained unchanged.

I slipped through the back entrance, navigating the damp, dim light. The half-hearted darkness, sealed off by plywood, required no artificial illumination. The barren corridors, stripped to bare concrete and devoid of decoration, resembled a desolate cave temple. I reached the end of the hallway.

Drawn by a wet, musty odour, I stepped into absolute darkness. Not a sliver of sunlight pierced the tightly sealed windows. Ordinarily, this would've triggered a primal dread, but as fate would have it, I'd lost my sense of fear right along with my left arm.

That missing limb was now replaced by a prosthetic. It was shaped like a hand but as lifeless as a mannequin's. No moving parts, just a sculpted arm crudely attached to my body. It resembled an arm in form alone but was utterly incapable of bending at the elbow, let alone the fingers. A far cry from the sleek, responsive prosthetic Kaie wore.

Of course. No blood yet coursed through it.

I stepped into the darkness without hesitation. The situation was dire, but there was still a chance she was alive. I had to act quickly but rationally to confirm her survival.

Then, a familiar electronic chime echoed from my pocket.

Ms. Mato? If she'd really managed to arrive this fast, it would be nothing short of a miracle, but I wasn't holding my breath.

"Hello, Ms. Ma—"

I raised the phone to my ear. In that instant, something hard pressed against the back of my neck.

◇

Crackle, crackle, crackle.

My brain became a firecracker three times over. My retinas seared. Consciousness sputtered, on the verge of cutting out completely. My command system short-circuited, leaving my body a mere lump of meat.

In a split-second decision, I clung to the tattered remnants of my awareness. Losing it now would be disastrous. Blacking out meant oblivion, and my presence here would have been for nothing. I drifted through a dreamlike haze, barely distinguishing reality from illusion, desperately guarding the flickering flame of consciousness.

Thump, thud.

Something fell.

I'd likely been electrocuted in the neck. The voltage had been enough to knock me out, but thankfully, the current was low. Maybe a single amp, two at most. Just enough to scramble my nerves, leaving me helpless for a devastating ten minutes.

Thump, thump.

Thump.

Drag.

My ankle was seized, and I was dragged. The bumping of my head probably meant stairs. The paralysis numbed the pain of my body hitting the ground. My vision, still seared by the electrical shock, wouldn't return until my retinas recovered.

Thump.

Scrape, scrape, scrape, squish, splat.

The sound of my body dragging across the floor softened.

Then, my head jerked upright. I was being propped up. Set down. Seated on a bench.

Snap, snap, creak, snap.

I was being bound with something ropelike. A chilling premonition washed over me. My fragile consciousness, dangling by a thread, conjured up a random image of boneless ham. Ah... it seemed I'd been selected as the next ingredient.

◇

My vision flickered back, and my unfocused retinas began to slowly make sense of the world again.

Chomp.

"...Ah."

The first thing that came to mind was a butcher's counter. Then, a trash heap strewn with rotting scraps. Finally, I realised I was inside a colossal mound of vomit. A particularly large room of the abandoned factory, clearly once used as a warehouse. Even gutted and ruined, the seven-metre-square space still hadn't lost its function as a storage area.

Chomp, chomp, chomp.

Dog carcasses were strung up on every wall. In one corner, a pulpy mound of something slouched, spilling toward the centre of the room. The air hung thick and

saccharine, almost nauseatingly so, like a honey trap. I felt as though I might spin into a cocoon if I stayed much longer. All the windows were sealed shut—no, wait, this room didn't have any windows. Shut the door, and it would descend into absolute darkness.

And yet, the enclosure was bathed in a pale luminescence. Where the electricity came from was anyone's guess, but countless monitors flickered on the walls, buzzing as they displayed footage of the factory grounds and the first-floor corridors.

Chomp, chomp, chomp, chomp, chomp.

The scene was utterly surreal. A tableau of bones, entrails, and flickering monitors. Like uncovering a CRT monitor nestled deep inside someone's guts during surgery. The vomitous room, bathed in the pale flicker of the monitors, had a focal point: a massive meatball, writhing and chowing down on a late lunch. It was dismantling a fifty-kilogram slab of meat, ripping it apart morsel by morsel.

Disconnection
the E.

"...hurtz. ...id hurtz, id hurtz!"

At first glance, it resembled a swollen tumour with appendages jutting out. Its form wasn't just bulky; it was a perfect sphere. Roughly my height, yet its sheer girth made it appear monumental. It wore nothing but a tattered loincloth. No surprise there. At that size, I don't even know if he'd fit into a king-sized bed.

"Noo... Noo, I cant... I cant ged any fadder than dis!"

Chomp, chomp, chomp.

On closer inspection, the walls weren't solely decorated with dog carcasses. There were also desiccated, jerky-like remains of bipedal creatures with two arms. Their sex was impossible to determine. Their chests were gone, and their faces had been flayed. Even more disturbing, their skulls were missing. Their heads had been neatly cleaved open, and the contents within painstakingly scooped out and slurped like custard.

Empty bottles littered the floor. Vinegar. Looks like the meatball had been dousing its pudding with vinegar for some extra flavour.

"...erts. Iwantodie, Iwantodie, Iwantodie, Iwantodie, Iwantodie, IwantodieIwantodieIwantodie!"

It mumbled "I want to die" over and over, completely oblivious to my presence as it continued its meal. At this pace, it'd be done in about two minutes. I was still frozen, tied tight to a chair with ropes so snug I couldn't even twitch. Still, compared to the other meat in the room, I was being treated relatively well. Apparently, I was dessert.

I wasn't scared. Well, even someone as desensitised to fear as I was would find this situation terrifying. It's just that what was at the meatball's feet had completely wiped my mind blank.

This was bad. I'd fought tooth and nail to keep conscious, but it looked like my sanity was going to crack first.

"Oi," I called out.

The meatball sluggishly turned its bulk.

"You… da priest."

The meatball's voice was strained, as if breathing itself was a struggle. No surprise there. Overeating wreaks havoc on digestion. Undigested sludge swells your stomach, sending spasms ripping through your entire body. Breathing becomes laboured, sweat pours from the skin, and the whole body feels like it could explode at any moment. Not my problem, though. What interested me more was that orange thing by its feet. I needed a closer look.

"…Oi. Did you… eat that?"

Just uttering those words sent a shockwave rattling through me. Was it a lingering effect from the shock, or the spark of my own rising emotions? My heart hammered like a wild stallion. Adrenaline surged. My prosthetic left arm, which had merely been attached, began to connect as my rationality frayed.

"Ead whad?"

"The meat. You're eating it right now, aren't you?"

As if remembering, the meatball resumed its meal, polishing off the remaining fifty kilos with clean efficiency. Then—

"I keeb eading n eading… but ids no good… I cant ged full!"

It lumbered toward me, its dessert. Clutched in its hand was a cheap wire saw. Tiny next to those thick, gnarled fingers, but more than enough to saw through a helpless human skull.

"Wait. You've already eaten several of them?"

"I ead… but ids no good. Ib only I could ged full, Id be fine. Ib only I could ged full, I could go back. Ib da debil would jusd disabbear, just like God zaid." Its words and laboured breathing sounded disturbingly familiar. "Im zoo zorry. I dont wand to ead anymore, but I cant ged full."

It wasn't listening. The meatball just kept spouting apologies, all while dousing me with more vinegar. A litany to a society that would most certainly damn it for devouring those like me, for cannibalising itself.

"Im zorry, Im zorry, Im zorry..."

Who was it apologising to? Certainly not me. Fusou Yukio was trying to justify its sins with a pitiful confession. I was on the side of the weak too, but this creature's weakness had long since fallen off the scale.

Crunch. The meatball crushed down on my skull without mercy.

Scratch. The wire saw kissed my temple. *Scratch. Scratch.*

I couldn't feel the pain because of the paralysis, but I knew the flesh near my left eye was being shaved raw with each pass.

"Gh!"

The numbness made it even more horrifying. If I had a mirror, I probably would've lost my mind already.

Scratch, scratch.

Unbeknownst to me, my skull was being methodically sawed through. I'd only realise my brain was gone when I was finally a mindless husk.

"Ids okay. Id doesnt hurt. Dont bee scared. Ive done id many timez. Your brain doeznt feel bain anymore, eben ib I poke id wib my fingerz."

The logic seemed to be that if it started eating from the head, they'd stop feeling anything afterwards. Eating someone alive, huh? I just wanted to lose consciousness and be done with it. But I figured I'd try asking for help anyway, even though it was a long shot.

"No, please. Let me go. I don't want to die," I spoke mechanically.

Instantly, I regretted it.

"Helb mee, Senbaai..."

The plea that had latched onto my eardrums reverberated in my skull. The meatball froze, studying me carefully.

"I know. Eberyone says da same thing."

It grinned, baring a sickeningly gleeful expression, like a child who'd found a playmate.

"...What did you say?"

"Eberyone says da same thing before dey ged eaten. Soo pitiful. Crying, begging for mee ta save dem."

Scratch, scratch.

The wire saw didn't stop. A slow trickle of blood ran down from my scalp, smearing the vision in my left eye. But honestly, I couldn't care less.

"Butt... dey are not like mee. I couldnt save dem. Those not chozen bai da debil... dey just die as dey are. I tried ta save dem, bud I couldnt. So, soo... pitiful."

With each apology, it seemed to relish in its dominion over the ones it couldn't save. Apologies that affirmed its own weakness. And then, it splashed more vinegar on me.

"Im sorry. But Im zick. Ib I dont do dis, I cant be at peace. So Ill ead you before id hurtz."

The wire saw picked up speed. My consciousness began to blur. Any sane person would have snapped by now. But...

"...Shut up. Don't get off on this, sicko."

This was the end. My reason for being here had vanished. There was nothing left in this room for me. There was no point trying to make sense of this meatball, no mercy worth wasting on it. The hound within my left arm could no longer be contained.

"...Chosen by God? Enough with the bullshit excuses. You weren't chosen—you crawled down this path yourself. You clung to Possession because you were too weak to face yourself."

"Whhaa?"

I'd once told someone the exact opposite. If you're sick, go to a hospital. A priest can't cure you. My bad. I was the one who didn't get it. Because this... this was beyond cure. And as everyone knows, there's no fix for stupid.

"D-Da colour ob your eyez..."

"Yeah. You remind me of another Possessed. Damn it, you actually made me remember. Trapped in an unconscious hell? Cut the crap. Scum like you always weaponise your own fragility."

Devils infest the already corrupt. The notion that Possession strips away your humanity is a farce. You were rotten to the core, riddled with cracks, and a flawed weakling from the start. That's why the devil chose you. There was never room for anyone to intervene.

"You pig. You didn't become Possessed because your heart was weak. You, Fusou Yukio, were weak from the start. This is what happens when people like you forget their place. You, who possessed nothing, who deserved nothing, had the audacity to believe you were chosen. You dared to imagine yourself reborn."

"Whaa are yuu… Whaa are yuu zaying! Yuu dun understand! I just wanded ta be at peace. Ib always been weakk, soo I wanded ta be reborn strongg! Whaz wrong wiv dat!"

"Everything. All humans were born unequal. That's the only real equality. Get it? It's not about averages—it's about established hierarchies. Balance isn't some delicate scale, weakling. And when bottom-feeders like you try to claw your way up, you just end up messing everything up."

"Im nat weakk! Im nat weakk! Im strongg, zoo strongg! God gave mee power, mayd mee strongg!"

"Impossible. Each human's potential is decided the moment they're born. Weaklings don't become strong. Oh, what? You think success is built on blood, sweat, and tears? Those standing at the top were always built for it. Don't kid yourself, pig. You should've figured it out by now: human nature isn't so malleable."

"Gah… Haa…"

That's right. Weaklings can never outpace their weakness. That's why those who embrace their own limits don't even dare to dream of salvation. That's the highest pride a weakling can truly own. They should wear it like a badge. And as one of them, I get it. Those who cast off that truth discard their worth right along with it.

"Humble though it may be, this is your home. To envy is to despise oneself. You sold your soul to the devil without a second thought—you're less than weak, you're

inhuman. Gaze upon this squalor, this cesspool of filth. Your journey thus ends here. For once you forsake your humanity, it can never be claimed anew."

"Shuddup! Shuddupshuddupshuddupshuddup! You dogg! Youre not eben human! Youre jast a noizy piece ob meat, like a dogg! Dont look ad mee! Howw dare yuu look downn on mee?!"

The man-eating Possessed detonated in a frenzy, hurling the wire saw aside. Its hand, like a fleshy gauntlet, clamped down on my skull.

"Im just searrchingg... Im nat doing anything wronng...! Im jast tryinng to finnd peace... so why... why doo yuu say succh awful things...?!"

Its bloated arms pulsed with straining veins. Fusou Yukio moved to crack open my head like it had the dogs, but—

"Fucking bastard. You'll pay for killing (breaking) one of mine. (my rules)"

Without warning, its chest was ripped open by a chunk of flesh moulded in the exact image of what it had consumed.

◇

I drove my fist into the festering meatball. Those jaws that had just sunk into it... my left arm, acting on its own volition, ripped through the wire-like rope and smashed into the meatball with merciless force. A point-blank explosion at five hundred metres per second. The two-hundred-kilogram lump of meat slammed into the wall like a discarded rag doll.

"...Ha!"

Laughter, raw and guttural, bubbled up from the pit of my stomach.

Emotions aren't born in the brain—they claw their way out of the heart.

My head was still numb from the electric shock, a dead zone. Two minutes and thirty seconds until my motor functions returned. My limbs were useless.

But so long as I was capable of breathing, my body would keep swinging. The brain was irrelevant—ligands stabbed into receptors at the synapses, firing off transmissions faster than light itself. Blood screamed through the capillary highways at three hundred kilometres per hour.

"HAHA, HAHAHA! IT HURTS, IT HURTS, OH, IT HURTS SO *FUCKING* BAD!"

Electric currents, blood, brain chemicals—everything fired all at once. My cells screamed, my nerves writhed, and my senses spun out of control. Then, *snap*, my left arm sliced down a guillotine. The severed end, numb since the day I lost it, suddenly reconnected, unleashing two years' worth of pent-up pain.

"HAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

It was complete. The severed end melted, fusing seamlessly with the black prosthetic. A torrent of blood, like a crimson tsunami, surged into it. It burgeoned, a grotesque bulb blooming to life. The blood flow became nerves, binding the prosthetic to me, making it *mine*.

I was alive! Alive! ALIVE!

The mannequin arm twitched, responding to my will. My lost left arm had returned, taking form, resurrected. Yes! Nothing else mattered! I was drowning in ecstasy. Flesh was *ecstasy!* I'm alive, damn it, I'm so FUCKING ALIVE!

"C'mon, c'mon! Let's get this show on the road! Bring it all! Every last regret, every single mouthwatering grudge you have in there! If you leave any loose ends, you're gonna end up in hell! And havin' a screw-up like you down there would make me lose my damn mind!"

I shrieked with laughter. This was *way* too much fun. My body was still immobile, but I was having a blast.

"Ahh... ha, ha? ...I zee. Soo yuu were Pozessed too."

The meatball hauled itself upright, its ruptured, engorged chest gushing blood. The bite marks raked across it like jagged slashes—typical of my naughty left arm. But my resurrected limb was now just a stump, chopped clean below the elbow.

"But... yer debils weakk and diny. Not scary ad all."

A vile stench wafted through the room. The beating seemed to have invigorated the meatball; it was drenched in sweat, or was it...stomach acid? It coated its entire

frame, a slimy, corrosive sheen. No matter how much punch I packed against it, I'd just end up melting myself. The hell was wrong with its body?

"But Im happy. My debils strongah. Im bettah than yuu."

It lumbered closer, fully aware I was still nailed to the chair.

"Im soo happy. Ib nebah eaten another Pozessed before."

Yukio, the meatball, grabbed a bottle of vinegar and staggered toward me. It had already forgotten the gaping wounds in its chest. Damn it, the only thing going through this meatball's head was its bottomless hunger!

"Yuu said something just noow. But itz not mee who needs to confess. Ass a fellow Pozessed... Ill save yuu."

Yukio's bloated cheeks slackened, sagging like wax. Gastric acid drooled from its palms as it crooked a grin. This guy really couldn't learn, could he? Its slick arm reached out, the flesh already beginning to melt and drip.

"...?"

The devils that possessed man lay dormant in the presence of rationality and self-awareness. So for just a few seconds, I relinquished the consciousness I'd so desperately clung to.

There, there. Sorry for the wait, Loathing. Be a good boy and chow down now.

◇

For a moment, everything went black. Then, a deafening shriek hollered through the air, sending my dark limb bursting apart. It scattered across the meatball before me—chunks of solid mass raining down, liquid splattering, and a strange, clinging gas coiling around it like fog.

"Wha... Noo, uhh, ah?"

The silhouette of the black monster writhed, as if engulfed in invisible flame. A bizarre, inhuman roar, not heard by my eardrums but felt in my brain, tore through me. Everything that made up Ishizue Arika was instantly sucked into my left arm. Just

like the night I lost it. All sensation in my body vanished, and I felt myself condense into that single limb.

"Ah… it hurtz, it hurtz, it huuuurtz!"

A scream—or perhaps a roar—tore from my throat. I blinked, and a familiar scene swam into focus: a meal. Just like five minutes ago. Only now, the main course had changed.

"Eeeeeeeek…! Whatt is dis, whatt is dis, whatt is diiiiis?!"

It was being eaten from the feet up. No, *devoured*. A black hound, about a metre tall, had pinned the meatball down. It was gaunt, almost like seaweed from the ocean. It clung to the meatball, and from the point of contact, a sickening crunching sound echoed.

"Whhhyyyy…?! Id hurtz, id hurtz, id hurtz! Im beeing eateen, Im beeing eateeenn!"

Its limbs shrivelled, starting from the edges. The sightless hound sniffed its prey, *sniff sniff*. The meatball offered no resistance, drenched in sweat. Ordinarily, anything touching that acidic mucus would dissolve on impact. But…

"Whhhyyy?! Youre not supposed to ead meee! Youre just my fooodd!"

How can you kill what has no form? Resistance is utterly meaningless. Attempting to erode it with gastric fluids is pointless, for it is already in decay. Destroying it with force is *equally* pointless, for it is already crumbling. An aberration unable to manifest without a human form is nothing more than a mildly amusing doll. To call such a thing a devil is a misnomer in itself.

If God is a complete, flawless being, omniscient and omnipotent, devils, conversely, are absurd, formless phenomena, nescient and impotent.

"Whhy, whhyyy whhyy?! Dis isnt rightt. Were both Pozessed, but were soo different!"

"Don't lump us together. What you have is just a disease. As for me…"

The devil of the basement had spoken.

"Only an imaginary sense of touch can host imaginary horrors. Brilliant, Ishizue Arika. Your left arm is the ideal—"

"Apparently, I wield a real devil."

The blind hound—a formless, imaginary entity, a devil born from my left arm, was feasting on the Possessed. Yukio was almost entirely gone, but the hound wasn't actually eating flesh. After all, how can something formless kill something with form? But swallowing it whole... that's a different story. If you erase every part of its 'existence,' it becomes nothing.

Think of it like Schrödinger's cat. With ninety percent of its body lost, Yukio was practically dead, but as long as even ten percent existed, one could argue that it was still clinging to life... sort of. Unfortunately, that last ten percent was only a matter of time.

"Nnnoo, nnnonono, Godddd pleeeassseee! I donnntt wanttt diss! Whhy is id soo painnfful! Ids not my fauult, ids not my fauult I got sicck, ids not my fauult da debil pozesseddd mee! God chosee me, God choseee meeee!"

Ah, those dying words... I'd heard them somewhere before, in the light of day.

"Sorry, but I don't remember meeting you."

"Aaaghhh! Itt was a longg time agoo, sooo lonngg! Yuu cameee too seeee mee soo many timessss!"

During the day, you say? Can't say I remember a damn thing. My right hand clenched, a twitch of life crawling back in.

"Alright. Guess I owe you an answer."

The knife. It was still there, thank goodness.

"Here's the cold, hard truth. Your cries fall on deaf ears. The gulf between devils and God is vast and unbridgeable. Devils interfere with humans because of their own impotency, but God is beyond such petty concerns. Your faith, your suffering, your happiness are utterly meaningless to Him. After all, His omnipotence is absolute; He needs nothing, least of all you. God will not answer your prayers. He has only ever had a single thing to say."

Blackened to the nose, Yukio's gaze was a plea. Knife in hand, I gave him the sendoff.

"You're a nuisance. Get lost."

"...Ah..."

Its eyes, half-sunken in blubber, stared back in stunned silence. Before the hound could devour the last morsel, I brought the knife down.

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With a single swing, I sliced through the last strand of flesh and slid the knife back into its sheath. A heavy silence blanketed the room, as if water had been poured over it. The meatball lay still, while the hound sniffed around, hunting for more. Sightless, it relied on scent to find its favourite meal. If I left it unsupervised, it'd probably start chewing on the unappetizing leftovers. So, I grabbed the affected hunk of flesh's lesion with my left arm and tossed it toward the dog.

"Ouch... Severing my arm is still the only sensation that remains, huh? You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

My left arm. Severed at the last moment. Once connected and fused, the prosthetic wouldn't detach unless cut with a blade. Conversely, separation alone would return the formless entity to its original state. Yukio's lingering body meant the dog hadn't finished the job. While the dog busied itself with its new meal, I turned to my own task.

I scanned the room, relying on the monitor's light to guide me. No other living humans were present. I picked up the cellphone lying at the meatball's feet. Fluorescent orange—it stood out even in the dim light. I recognised it. I'd seen it just last night.

"Let's go. You're done eating, right?"

No response.

Turning, I found the hound gone, the severed prosthetic lying alone on the floor. Deciding against reattachment, I scooped it up with my right hand.

Three hours until sunset. Were there still three hours to go, or only three hours left? Honestly, it was both too long and too short to make peace with my memories before they were gone.

/ 2.8

The sun had long since set, casting me into an inexplicably gloomy mood. It was past 8 PM, and Kaie's black prosthetic lay sprawled across the table. Fighting off a migraine, I checked my notes, hoping to find a scribbled "Nothing special." But the page for today was missing.

"?"

Seven whole pages had been ripped clean out of the notebook. I racked my brain, but nothing came to mind. Worse, I suddenly felt like I was about to die of hunger. I must not have eaten since morning. If the club sandwich from last night was my last real meal, then I'd officially run on empty for a whole day. Not good. Regardless of the reason, people die if they don't eat.

Still in the clothes I'd slept in, I headed to my usual izakaya, Seiun (Nebula). The evening rush was in full swing. I really shouldn't've bothered. I turned on my heel, ready to go and find somewhere quieter, but then—

Amidst the bustling crowd, some idiot started waving energetically.

"Ah, it's Senpai! Yoo-hoo! Over here!"

Well, changing spots now would just be a pain in the ass. And for whatever reason, the second I saw her, it felt like a load had been lifted off my shoulders, so I figured I'd join her.

"Geez, Senpai, you're late! Were you at Kaie's again?"

Tsuranui puffed out her cheeks, the same familiar gesture and words from last night. There was no way we'd actually planned to meet.

"Hm? Senpai, why are you staring at me like that? Gosh, I'm not even wearing makeup today."

"No reason in particular, really. More importantly, why are you alive?"

"Huh? Why wouldn't I be?"

A brief silence fell between us. We locked eyes, like two total strangers forced into an arranged marriage interview.

"My bad, I don't really get it either. But you're alive, so that's good enough."

I ordered a club sandwich and a glass of water. The strange unease I'd felt earlier had ebbed away completely, now replaced by the usual pointless banter with Tsuranui.

"Oh, right! Look, Senpai, my new phone! This time, I went for a vibrant, tropical theme. Cute, right? It's like a chameleon!"

Impressive. Didn't we have this exact conversation yesterday?

"Here, I'm gonna call you so that you can save my number… Wait, huh? Senpai, did you leave your phone at your place?"

"Hm? Nah, I've got it right here."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out an orange phone.

"Ah, that's my phone! Why do *you* have it, Senpai?!"

"Why? 'Cause I found it, obviously."

There really wasn't any other possible answer. Couldn't remember when or where I'd picked it up, though.

"Ah. So you got my voicemail and went to the factory? Did you find Yukio? I'm a lil' embarrassed to admit it, but I kinda got scared and ran off."

Another migraine. Even with the gaps in my memory, the pieces were starting to line up. But I decided not to dig any deeper. The missing notebook pages… Whatever version of me existed three hours ago must've thought it was for the best.

"Huh? Senpai, you don't look so good. You okay?"

"Who knows. Hard to tell what your own face looks like without a mirror, right? More importantly, about this phone."

My hand was outstretched, ready to return the phone, when suddenly, I changed my mind. Tsuranui already had a new one, and I'd apparently lost mine.

"Mind if I keep it? Pretty sure mine's a goner."

Tsuranui blinked, her eyes widening in surprise. Then, as if a switch had flipped, her cheeks turned a delicate shade of red, and she began tracing a character on the table. It was "の."

"Geez, Senpai, are you *that* interested in my personal info? Hehe, but I guess it's okay, just because it's you…"

"Nah, I already wiped it."

"Wow, that was fast! No fair, show a little interest!"

She pounded the table, creating a loud ruckus that turned every head in the izakaya. But tonight, I felt like humouring her.

"Alright, this is mine now. I'll pay you back later."

"Kay~! Take good care of it, alright?"

To make up for what I'd lost, I'd slipped another lost item into my pocket. The heaviness in my chest, something I couldn't quite place, eased just a little. Just the weight of a phone. This time, I'd hang onto it. For as long as I could.

The stranger something is, the more it seems to grow on you once it's yours. And when you actually take a second to look… Those bright colours, the kind that turn heads? Maybe they're not such a bad choice, after all.

3 / junk the eater.

◇

For some reason, my shift started at night this time. Kaie had rung earlier, saying he was tied up with some investigation, and told me to rest up and come by later. The nerve of that guy, bossing me around.

Since when did I become his personal errand boy? I was fuming, but let's face it—I *was* his errand boy. So, like the good little manservant I was, I showed up.

"So, that's the rundown of the Fusou Yukio expulsion on October 13th. ...Hey, Arika, are you even listening?"

Kaie had *way* too much time on his hands. His so-called 'urgent business' turned out to be him droning on about the nitty-gritty of the expulsion from a few days back. Word was the infamous dog killer had been taken care of. And *I* was the one who'd allegedly taken care of it. Of course, I didn't remember a damn thing. All I could dredge up was the nonsense Tsuranui spouted and that unsettling footage she'd forced on me.

"Arika, you seriously don't remember? Come on, there's no way you forgot *everything*. What about your notes? Your phone?"

"Nope, all gone. Looks like every record was wiped clean. So, no matter how nicely you ask, I've got jack to offer."

"Wow, you sure came prepared. Guess I'm out of luck then. I was hoping to hear about what kind of Possessed Fusou Yukio was, the amount they ate, and why, yet again, you didn't put them down."

Kaie laughed, tossing his long hair back. That look of his always got under my skin. His pale, shadowed eyes felt like they were clawing into parts of me I didn't even know existed.

"There's nothing to think about. If they're still breathing, they clearly weren't worth the effort. Possession's an illness, remember? The sick oughta be handled with a bit of care."

"Huh. So you managed to stay composed, even then? But Arika, that prosthetic arm of yours is made from my emotions, you know? If you activated it, that means the right emotions were at work. You *definitely* felt loathing for Fusou Yukio."

Karyou Kaie's prosthetic limbs—four, black, plaster-like appendages. Even now, I couldn't make heads or tails of them. Apparently, they were originally created from human emotions. Limbs constructed to provide Kaie with a 'human form.' Losing my left arm meant losing the part of me that processed threats. My body, once whole, was now incomplete, and with that loss came the fading of my emotions. So, hypothetically—could someone born without touch create a human form by trading away their emotions? Discarding the four fundamental human emotions to give form to each sense of touch... perhaps?

"What a shame. I'd hoped things might take a different turn this time, but here you are, playing the hero again. Ah, I'm starving too. Maybe I ought to go on a rampage myself."

Tonight, Kaie had prosthetics on both his arms and legs. Just the two of us in the basement. No fish drifting overhead, no mutt skulking in the dark.

"...Hmph. Knock yourself out. And just so you know, I didn't save anyone. I don't remember a thing, but if I didn't finish them off, then it was for my own sake. No other motive comes to mind for letting a Possessed off."

I tried to piece together a past that was no longer mine. I shouldn't have felt a shred of pity for a Possessed. So it *must* have been for my own sake. Kill or don't kill—a simple choice. No matter how monstrous or worthless the target was, I still had a conscience to keep clean. And the only way to die a proper death was to avoid shouldering that sorta guilt. I spared them for *myself*. It *had* to be.

"Ah, I see. So you prioritised Ishizue Arika's life over redeeming Fusou Yukio. Still the same trembling little coward, aren't you? But really, with such a cute face? It's hard to fault you."

Yeah, yeah. That's the last thing I want to hear from a guy, especially one younger than me.

"So much for that, I suppose. Oh well, maybe next time. Ms. Mato's documents are useless now. If Fusou Yukio's just another Possessed in your eyes, there's little sense in pursuing it any further. Here, give these back to her."

Kaie held out an envelope.

"To Ms. Mato? Why me?"

"Because *you* brought them. ...Oh, right, you wouldn't remember. Daytime, huh? I suppose you don't recall why Fusou Yukio turned, either. It was *anorexia*. A pretty sympathetic case, actually."

"Anorexia?"

That dog eater became Possessed because of *anorexia*? That didn't line up. In the footage Tsuranui showed me, they were oddly overweight.

"Huh? I thought you weren't interested?"

"I'm not, but this is bothering me. Hand over the envelope."

I skimmed Ms. Mato's documents. It checked out. Anorexia *was* listed as the cause. But sixty kilos of chow a day? That just didn't make sense. Shouldn't an anorexic... stop eating?

"Kaie, what's going on? This doesn't look like anorexia to me."

"Hm? Oh, I get it. You're misunderstanding something fundamental, Arika. You think they got Yukio's diagnosis wrong, don't you? That the presence of gluttony must, by default, point to bulimia."

"Yeah. Abnormal food consumption—that's the only explanation, right?"

"That's where you're mistaken. Bulimia and anorexia may appear to be polar opposites, but at their core, both spring from the same psychological root: the fear of weight gain. You see, both are mental illnesses, more prevalent in women."

Kaie explained that both illnesses involve losing bodily control due to emotional warfare. It's simply a matter of addition or subtraction—both anorexia and bulimia are just warped equations aimed at weight loss.

Anorexia is the fear of weight gain—of eating itself—so intense that your stomach rejects food. Bulimia, on the other hand, develops when weight loss efforts

fail. It's a runaway stress response to food, born from the despair of gaining weight despite trying to prevent it. An anorexic looks at their emaciated self and sees nothing wrong, while a bulimic, consumed by thoughts like 'I don't want to gain weight. I can't stand the sight of myself. I'd rather die,' is driven to eat by the very stress they're trying to suppress. These illnesses, with their self-destructive mental structures, aren't contradictions; they're emotions anyone can experience. The fear of becoming ugly is something no one can truly ignore.

"I get the gist, but how exactly can they be opposites? If the root cause is the same, why are the outcomes so different? Since Yukio had anorexia, shouldn't the devil within have been rejecting food instead?"

"Right. That's what makes this case so interesting. Fusou Yukio's struggle with anorexia was a long one. What emotion do you suppose dominated them throughout that time?"

"...The fear of gaining weight, right?"

"No, it's far more primal. Still not seeing it? Fusou Yukio hadn't eaten properly in years. So think, what becomes absolutely unbearable after that long?"

"...Hunger. So, you're saying that..."

"Exactly. It was hunger, plain and simple. That fundamental craving, corrupted by the devilish illness, transformed them into a Possessed driven to insatiable gluttony."

Hence, bulimia. Knowing full well that consuming more food would result in weight gain, Yukio, driven by an overwhelming hunger, lost control over their appetite.

"...Hold on. What about the dogs? That's a bit much, even for hunger. If they were desperate, why not go for actual food? You're not saying they actually preferred eating cats and dogs, are you?"

"Ah, that? Taste had nothing to do with it, Arika. Hunger may have triggered the Possession, but that wasn't the goal. Anorexia and bulimia, as I explained, are rooted in the same psychological dynamic."

The same dynamic? Kaie had said they both sprang from...

"...Ah. You can't be serious. You're not saying Yukio ate strays and people because—"

"I'm afraid so, Arika. Possessed by a ravenous hunger, Yukio was trapped. An anorexic enslaved by hunger—a living nightmare. A common delusion took hold: the fantasy of a food that wouldn't cause weight gain. Knowing they couldn't stop eating, they desperately sought this nonexistent solution."

Taste didn't matter. To Yukio, no matter how repulsive, the ideal food was anything that wouldn't lead to weight gain. But such a thing didn't exist, at least not in their world. So, they desperately searched for unknown, uneaten foods, desperate for salvation.

"It tracks, doesn't it? Honestly, it's pretty common these days. Everyone's watching their calories, trying to drink less and get enough sleep. It's not just Yukio, Arika. Nobody wants to carry extra weight. You've got to keep your body in check with the right amount of food."

◇

I shoved the documents back into the envelope and heaved a tired sigh. The whole thing left a foul aftertaste. Someone losing their mind over something like that... it just didn't sit right.

"Thanks. Now that I've got my answer, I'm out of here."

"Huh? Already? You just *got* here. Why not stick around a bit longer? Oh, you know what? You could even crash here for the night. We only ever talk during the day. Wouldn't it be nice to have a conversation you'll actually remember for once?"

"Hard pass. This place is a downer, there's no booze, and I've already got my paycheck. On payday, I'd rather blow off steam at a real bar."

Besides, I wasn't in the mood, and I definitely didn't have the energy to pull an all-nighter with Kaie, especially with all his creepy prosthetics attached.

"See ya. If you're so desperate to geek out over the Possessed, hit up Ms. Mato. You two should just compare your philosophies of annihilation all night. And stop dragging me, an innocent bystander, into your mess."

"What are you talking about, Arika? You're not so different yourself. Don't you realise it? To everyone else, you're just as Possessed as anyone."

"Huh. This is *your* left arm, remember? I'm only using it because you talked me into it. It's an attachment, so it's not like I'm Possessed."

"That's not what I meant. I'm talking about your condition. Forgetting everything that happens during the day by the time the sun sets—it's hard to watch. It's like watching someone die every evening."

"Oh, that. You're a dog with a bone, you know that?"

I stood up, tucking the envelope under my arm.

The moon above was incandescent, and the reservoir, crystal clear, shimmered with a liquid silver glow.

Well, then. It's not important, but I had this one bad habit I couldn't seem to shake. Even though I was fully aware of it, I couldn't fix it. A vice, I suppose.

"Hey, come on. What's so pitiful about it? If anything, it's kinda convenient. I get to wipe the slate clean every night, you know?"

That's right. Just like Kaie said, I forgot everything that happened during the day. From morning till evening, it was all wiped clean by sunset. I remembered the nights perfectly well, but anything during the day was reset. A daily amnesia of sorts. *That* was Ishizue Arika's reality.

A side effect from two years ago, when a Possessed chewed off my left arm. A benign Possession, according to Ms. Mato. I guess I should count myself lucky that I already had a fully developed personality by the time it happened. I wasn't a kid who couldn't tell right from wrong, so losing my daytime memories wasn't a huge deal. So long as I avoided making any commitments during the day and deferred every decision for the night, I could manage. That's why I tried to keep my notes as short as possible. Two years' worth of memos that simply said, "Nothing special." No need for excruciating detail about every little thing. Whatever happened during the day wasn't a problem. Because no matter what, there was nothing left to hold onto.

"Wanting to live easy is my motto. This whole forgetting stuff suits me just fine. Mind your own business."

I turned away from the moonlight. It was getting late; I needed to get back above ground before the date changed.

"I see. I suppose it *does* lighten the burden. No memories, no worries, after all. But Arika, you do realise that there's a difference between living easy and actually enjoying your life, right?"

Kaie's voice rang out like the tinkling of a bell. His eyes, twin crystals, gleamed with golden amusement.

"You *want* an easy life, but you're not exactly living it, are you? That's no motto: it's just wishful thinking. You're not as untroubled as you'd like others to believe. Keep pretending, and something truly terrible might stake its claim on you."

"Cut the crap. If some bad shit was gonna get me, it already has. Oh, right. You know how you're always rambling on about real and fake devils? Turns out there's a simpler way to tell 'em apart."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Fake devils leech off humans, but real devils don't bother. Pretty sure you've heard about this before too. Devils appear only in exchange for a human soul. In other words, they're in it for the quid pro quo."

In the pale gloom, I felt the shift in his expression—a grin. The little freak had pieced it together right away. I wanted his left arm. He wanted mine. See? I'd already made a deal with a devil long ago.

"Alright then. I'll swing by tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you around noon."

I left the basement without a backward glance.

Reaching the surface, I found the world pitch black—darker than whatever trench I'd just clawed my way out of. I walked through the forest and into the open fields. The stars were high, the night long. Half a day was more than enough for a person to get by. And for someone like me, halved by the loss of an arm, it was the perfect amount. As I made my way toward town, I pulled out my orange phone and dialled a familiar number.

"Hey, what's up? Tsuranui? You free?"

Alright. I've got some cash on me now, so let's treat ourselves with some real food for once.

/ Anorexic Bulimia End

/ 2.7

▪▪▪

Stepping out of the abandoned building, I was met with a rush of fresh air—a welcome relief. It must have loosened me up, because I slumped right down without even thinking. I fished out my phone and replayed the voicemail.

"Hey, Senpai. It's Mihaya..."

Delete.

"I just saw Yukio. You told me not to get too—"

Delete.

"—but they also look like they're hurting, and I just..."

Delete.

Going through it again, I realised I'd have to delete the call history, too. The whole thing felt so stupid, I wanted to scream.

"Ugh!"

I hurled the phone at the wall and gave it a few solid kicks for good measure. There. That oughta do it. Once the sun set, it would all be over. But it was no good if any record remained. If the memories weren't coming back, I might as well wipe the rest of it out, too.

Just then, a bright red car tore through the factory gate. Ms. Mato's Volvo. Damn, she really got here in under an hour. That woman's something else.

"Shozai!"

She hurried out, looking genuinely concerned. It was weirdly comforting. No matter how broken I was, or how hardened she seemed, having someone who gave a damn still meant something to me.

"Hey. That was fast."

"Not fast enough, apparently. You look like shit, Shozai. Oh, and you stink. Did you take a bath in vinegar or something?"

She hit the nail on the head. But knowing how deep her junk food addiction ran, I figured I'd keep quiet. She'd probably give me an earful.

"So? The Possessed?"

Her question wasn't about location, but whether they'd made it out alive.

"Passed out in the third-floor warehouse. By the way, Ms. Mato, did you have lunch?"

"Oatmeal and two rib sandwiches. Why the sudden interest?"

"Oh, just a little evil curiosity. Anyway, I'm bouncing before the cops show up."

"Yeah, probably for the best. —Wait, Shozai. Do you recognise this girl?"

She held out a photo of a girl who looked about fourteen or fifteen. Looking like a shrivelled husk of a tree, the school uniform hanging off her frame felt disturbingly familiar.

"Huh? Who's this?"

"The Possessed. Got this from her parents after we split this morning."

"What? *That* was a girl?"

"Yep, that's her. Fusou Yukio. Heard you two went to the same high school. You *really* don't recognise her?"

"Nope. Not at all."

"Right. Well, I guess lightning does strike like that sometimes. Good work. You can head home now. I might have some more questions later, depending on how things go."

Ms. Mato made a call and then disappeared into the abandoned building. Meanwhile, I left the factory, prosthetic arm in hand.

So, that's how it was. That was a girl? Getting too hung up on it would probably lead to some unpleasant conclusions, so I locked the memory away and buried it deep. I tore out seven pages of notes, erasing every trace. But the words burned into my ears… those I couldn't reconcile.

Three hours until sunset. Were there still three hours to go, or only three hours left? I thought back to that brief exchange. Maybe I understood her better because I knew what it was like to be weak. But that's the catch, isn't it? Only the weak can truly understand each other. And because of that, we're the least equipped to save anyone

else. Even though we shared each other's suffering, we lacked the strength to lighten it.

"Helb mee, Senbaai..."

Know sorrow, the saying goes. But just knowing it isn't enough; it has to leave an indelible mark. I briefly thought about writing everything down while I had time, but quickly crushed that thought. It wouldn't matter.

Oh, well. It would all be lost to the night anyway.

/ JtheE.end

2. HandS.(R)

1scomection

▪▪▪

No matter what they did, nothing ever seemed to work out.

One summer night, after being spotted by a ghost in broad daylight, they found themselves lying dazed atop their bed's upper bunk. It struck them then—perhaps they'd been operating under some vast delusion this whole time, one they might never break free from, regardless of how long they struggled to set it straight.

By the next morning, their fears had come true. Their father's smile, once perceived as warm and genuine, now struck them as cold and calculating, the rose-coloured veil lifted. Their mother's gentle gaze, once believed to be brimming with love, now bore the unmistakable cloud of pity.

In that moment, they recalled a friend who'd stumbled on the stairs—just a single misstep, but they'd tumbled all the way down. By all accounts, they had been a model student. Straight A's, top of the class, the kind of kid whose name alone commanded admiration.

But the ghost they had encountered the day before had laughed.

Get it through your head. Nothing's ever worked out for you. You've been failing this whole time.

...And no matter how fiercely they sought to rectify things, it was of no avail. Their approach lacked a crucial element—the very components that kept a machine running. For a car devoid of brakes is defective, no matter how fast it can go. It's only a matter of time before it succumbs to a collision.

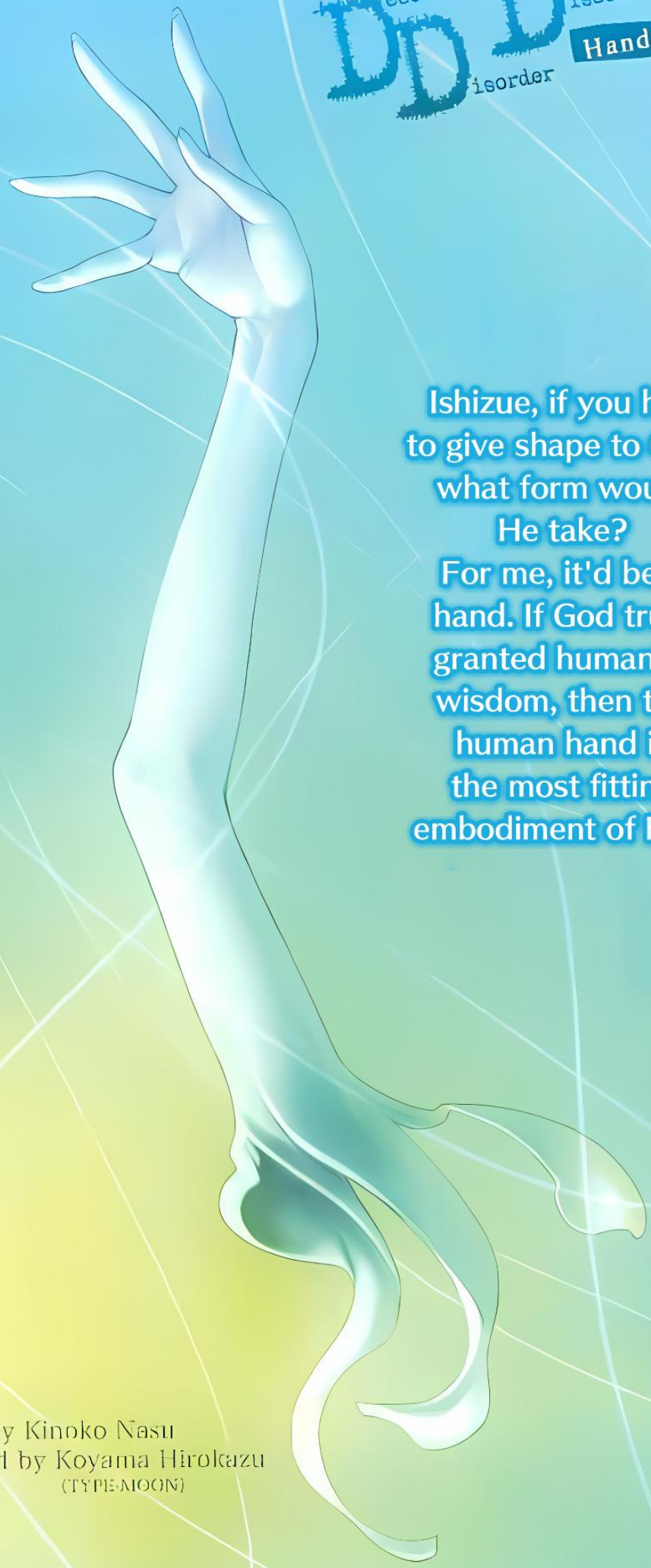
This revelation only compounded their despair. They finally comprehended that, on their own—no, through their own methods—they would invariably estrange everyone around them. With no other choice, they resolved to—

◇

And thus, their fate was sealed.
No matter what they did, nothing ever seemed to work out.

HandS.(R)

Decoration Disconnection Disorder HandS



Ishizue, if you had to give shape to God, what form would He take?
For me, it'd be a hand. If God truly granted humanity wisdom, then the human hand is the most fitting embodiment of Him.

Written by Kinoko Nasu
Illustrated by Koyama Hirokazu
(TYPE-MOON)

/ Early 2004

◇

Hisaori Shinya, sixteen, male.

The one responsible for the assault on his sister, Hisaori Makina, at their family home. The mental state he was found in placed his criminal liability under scrutiny, which was how he landed here for treatment.

"My name? Seriously, you're asking that now? There was a time my name meant something, but all of that's been stripped away already. Still, if we're going by the paperwork—official records, test results, all that bureaucratic crap—then yeah, I'm Hisaori Shinya. No doubt about it."

When he was first admitted, Shinya was anything but cooperative. He wouldn't own up to the crime, wouldn't even confirm that he was Hisaori Shinya.

The prosecution flirted with the idea that he was just trying to avoid implicating himself, but the psychiatric panel unanimously agreed he required immediate care. Three separate evaluations diagnosed him with a dissociative disorder so severe that, even if he wanted to believe he was Shinya, he couldn't.

"...I get it, okay? No need to spell it out. I'm still me, no matter what. But what the hell was I supposed to do? Nothing about me had changed, and yet, my footing in the world vanished in the blink of an eye. I had plummeted from my chair, an outsider in a place I had just belonged."

Shinya's testimony was riddled with expressions about losing himself, with the word 'invasion' often appearing within them. His doctor diagnosed him with

scopophobia—fear of being watched—and a constant paranoia that someone, or something, was always observing him.

"So, here's the thing. After I fell, some indescribable devil took my place. And the rest of you just stood by and let it happen, like it was nothing."

The incident was savage—two fatalities, one gravely wounded—but his psychological state and age were taken into consideration. The medical team pressed for compulsory hospitalization, which the court sanctioned.

Two weeks after the incident, Shinya finally confessed to his crimes and even showed remorse. His doctor noted in his file that the outburst was an isolated episode and recommended a lighter sentence due to the prospect of complete recovery with proper treatment. However...

"...Huh? No chance. I'm not crawling back to my old life. The moment they dragged me here, my name lost all meaning. Clinging to a place I no longer belong? That's just gross. I'm not sticking around just to play the outcast."

And so, Shinya confessed to murdering his parents and assaulting his sister.

"That's why I wanna die. The sooner, the better. But not like this. Sure, I've got tons of resentment, but this is my mission now, isn't it? I'm the one responsible for unleashing it. Yeah. So now I've gotta burn what's left of my life to put that devil down."

To this day, he maintains he was the victim.

This is the official transcript of Hisaori Shinya's testimony from three years ago, recorded in the wake of the murders of Hisaori Koji and Hisaori Kayo.

◇

"...Hisaori from Room 3? The one everyone says is such a perfect patient? I heard he's being discharged. Wow, I can't believe that's how he ended up here. Still, it's kinda tragic, isn't it? Considering he's killed two people, isn't he heading straight to juvie once he gets out?"

"That's what everyone thought until six months ago. But you know, that whole Possession thing? Because of that, the deaths of his parents were chalked up as accidental."

"Wait, you're kidding, right?! I heard that stuff was a false accusation. Like, he *did* snap and assault them, but they were, you know, already dead when it happened."

"Oh, really? Still, how'd this whole thing even start?"

"Oh, you didn't hear? It's because Shinya's older sister—"

0 / Hand (R)

Early Summer, 2003

▪▪▪

The hospital's front entrance was a solid wall of concrete.

A colossal glass doorway, nearly ten metres tall, stood sealed shut from the outside. For those of us within, it felt like a symbol of a recurring nightmare—not just psychologically, but physically. There's a particular strain of agony in having the sole entrance completely cut off.

It wasn't simply the fact that we, the patients, were unable to leave. What felt more unsettling was that this extensive healthcare facility had no outpatients—not a single visitor from the outside world. One could scarcely call it a hospital at all, not without outpatients.

Of course, that was just my take. Regardless of how I felt about it, this place was undeniably a hospital. A sprawling compound of five interlinked wings, staffed by over a hundred personnel, it was the prefecture's largest medical institution.

And yet, no patient could tell you its precise location. The running theory was that we were somewhere in Hokuriku, but frankly, it was a moot point. We were locked in either way.

In my days as a functioning member of society—before my admission here—I'd heard that the Possessed were consigned to research facilities. Places with names like Origa or Kinui. This establishment, however, was nothing so nefarious. It was, in fact, a genuine hospital where doctors dutifully worked day in and day out to improve our condition.

The buildings, uniformly white, were immaculate.

Spacious hallways. Sterile rooms. A courtyard nestled between high concrete walls on all sides, and a sunlit waiting room framed by floor-to-ceiling windows. Every feature conspired to present the illusion of normalcy.

Which was precisely why the sealed front entrance stood out so jarringly. Yet, in a way, it felt like the only thing that truly reminded us of our reality.

As I made my way back from the front entrance toward Ward B, home to the hospital's sole courtyard, music began to spill through the building.

Albinoni's Adagio.

Simultaneously, several patients in Ward B's waiting room quietly peeled off and drifted back to their rooms. Free time had concluded in one of the wards.

Whenever patients transitioned between wards, they were greeted by music, a signal to return to their rooms. Announcing over the PA, "Patients of Ward So-and-so, your free period is over," would've been way too blunt, and it was likely deemed prudent not to disclose ward affiliations to other patients.

Today's music was Adagio across the board. As a resident of Ward C, I'd been greeted by Brahms' Adagio when I departed earlier. So I figured the patients filing out must've been from Ward A or B. Meanwhile, Ward D patients were restricted from this area, so they were out of the question.

In this manner, even with daily musical variations, anyone observant enough could cross-reference the music to deduce proper ward affiliations. But no one here cared enough to bother with that, and the hospital staff likely understood this.

The patients permitted outside their rooms were as docile as the deceased, lending the waiting room an eerie tranquility. Rows of sofas, likely never fully occupied since the hospital's inception, were sparsely populated with patients.

Bathed in the drowsy amber light of afternoon, the waiting room resembled a chapel. It was disorienting. A congregation of the dead basking under the sun, offering up their silent prayers.

"…"

It evoked a memory of a certain summer day, and before I knew it, I felt as though I had joined the ranks of the departed. As a sudden wave of vertigo swept over me, I let myself sink into a nearby sofa.

◇

This secluded hospital was established a decade ago.

A specialized treatment facility, it opened a full ten years after the first officially recognized case of Agonist Disorder—colloquially known as Possession. If you took that at face value, it meant the earliest—or oldest—documented case dated back roughly twenty years.

The condition was so alien to accepted medical frameworks—so far removed from conventional pathology—that the response from the healthcare system was agonizingly slow. Consequently, the government stepped in, acquiring a partially constructed municipal hospital on the outskirts of N Prefecture, and reconfigured it into a treatment centre for afflicted patients.

Since then, individuals diagnosed with Agonist Disorder had been admitted to this facility, granted both the obligation and the right to receive specialized treatment. As the nation's sole and most advanced facility of its kind, the hospital accepted patients from all over the country. Although, given the illness's disproportionate prevalence in eastern Japan, 'all over' might be something of a stretch. In principle, any confirmed cases were taken into state custody and brought here, becoming residents of Wards A through D.

Upon admission, discharge wasn't an option until full recovery was achieved, with even family visits categorically prohibited. Officially, this was to prevent the spread of misinformation and to safeguard patient confidentiality, but the enforcement was undeniably draconian. Even now, ten years after its inauguration, the facility's stringent secrecy remained a point of contention. However, for the patients themselves, it was inconsequential.

A pristine sanctuary, completely isolated from the outside world. A self-contained microcosm so thoroughly detached, it often felt as though the outside world had ceased to exist entirely. Yet, for those of us marked by this affliction, it was quite simply the most ideal environment imaginable.

◇

"—ori? Are you okay, Hisaori? Are you feeling unwell?"

A soft-spoken voice tugged me back from my stupor. I slowly pushed myself upright on the sofa and muttered, "I'm fine."

The on-duty physician stationed in the waiting room checked my left pulse and pupils, then delivered the standard verdict: no issues.

"All right, then. Try not to push yourself too hard. There's no shame in asking for help if you can't make it back to your room on your own."

With his usual gentlemanly demeanor, Dr. Roman—officially Dr. Kinui—walked off.

Even though they call it an infectious disease, this thing doesn't spread through the air or by touch. No transmission through saliva, skin, or non-human vectors. In principle, those who develop the disease don't contribute to its spread. That's the one constant across the otherwise wildly inconsistent symptoms of Agonist Disorder.

And Dr. Roman, true to his reputation, interacted with patients without a hint of fear. Naturally, not all of the other doctors were quite so carefree or charitable.

Outside, those with Agonist Disorder were called Possessed. Quite the harsh term, but considering they're no longer fully human, it's not entirely inaccurate.

From what I've heard, something in the brain locks into an obsessive feedback loop, causing new organs to begin forming somewhere in the body. Milder cases might only amplify or suppress certain physiological functions, but in more extreme cases, entirely new functions could emerge. Simply put, their appearance changes.

In my case, my facial nerves grew just the tiniest bit more delicate, but otherwise, I still looked like your everyday person. However, some of the patients in the waiting room had sixth fingers or strange protrusions—clear, visible transformations.

Disorders are comprised of two types: those whose baseline bodily functions are dialed up or down, and those whose bodies undergo complete somatic transformations. The latter are full-blown freaks, and Dr. Kinui's compassion for them is nothing short of saintly. His nickname, 'Dr. Roman,' wasn't just for show. Talking to him almost made you believe this disease was curable.

But of course, even if it could, my crimes wouldn't vanish. My life had already ended the moment I set foot in this hospital.

"...I went too far back then. Didn't need to take it that far."

It had been two years since then. I messed up and was caught. I'd been so fixated on engineering the perfect crime that I never laid a finger on my parents myself. I just set the trap.

For six months, I meticulously laid the groundwork, all while sharing the same roof. It wasn't the kinda thing you could possibly sidestep. And my parents walked straight into it, just not the way I'd planned. The result? Two bodies lined up in our house.

"...What a shame. No matter the outcome, the setup itself was flawless."

But in the end, none of that mattered. I was quickly identified as Possessed and taken into custody.

Guess I had it coming. The plan itself was perfect, but the fatal misstep was having a goal at all. In the end, the price I paid was being locked up in this hospital.

Still, compared to the others, I've got a shot.

Two years after the incident, my folks' deaths were ruled accidental, and thus my supposed verdict was partially overturned. I hadn't killed anyone, so maybe I could afford to be a little optimistic.

My immediate concerns were whether I could fully recover and, even if I did, whether I'd be allowed to leave.

I wanted to rejoin society. That was the whole point, after all. I got sidetracked by my parents' accident, but now it was time to return to my original intent and rebuild myself.

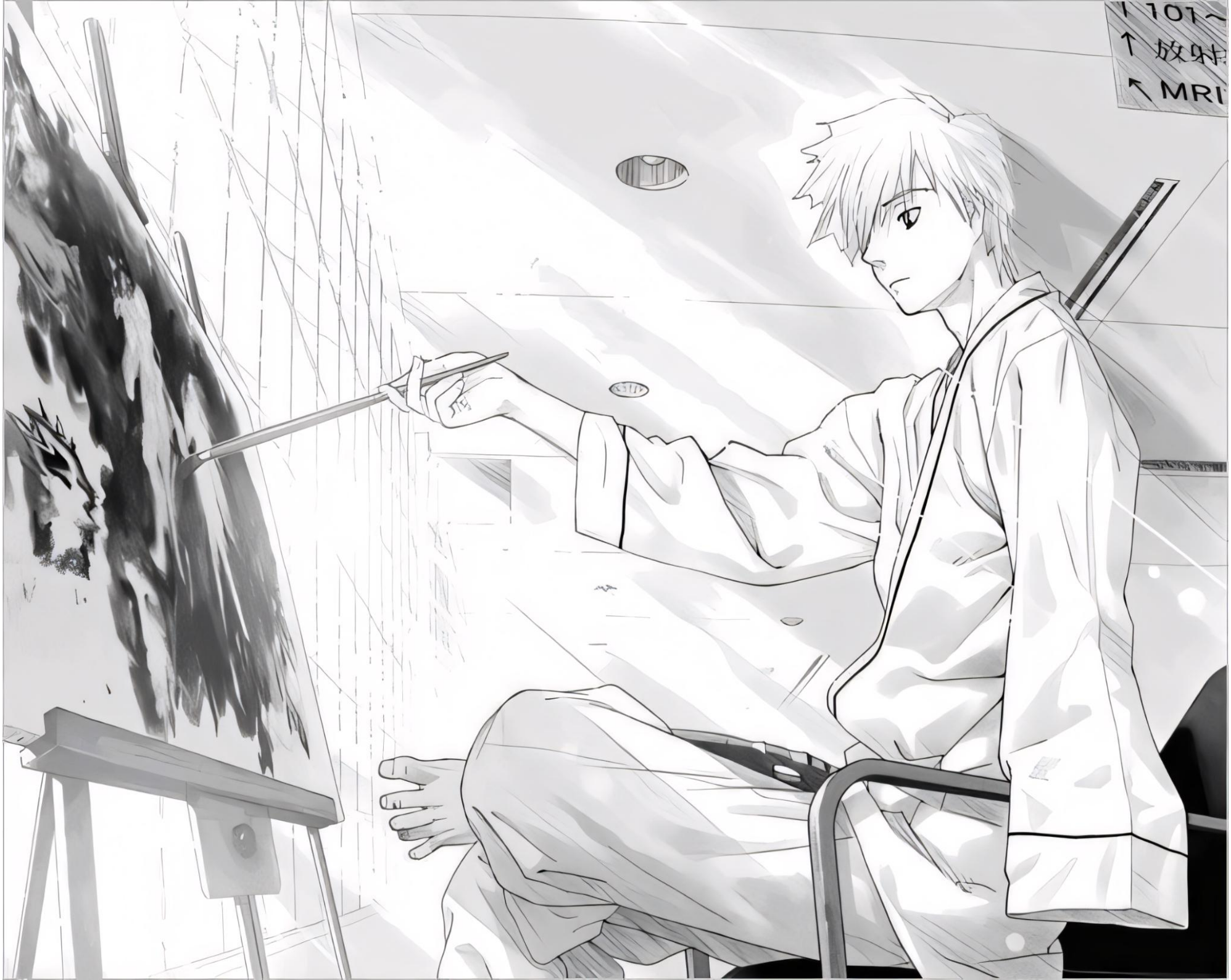
I'd thought a lot about what I did. Next time, I'd live in a way that didn't hurt anyone. And to do that, I needed to find a new way of living—no, I *had* to.

"...Huh?"

As I cocked my chin, buoyed by the faintest ripple of optimism, something unusual drew my eye.

By the courtyard's glass door, a scene that didn't belong.

A young man, his hair white despite looking about my age, was lazily painting on a canvas, bathed in sunlight. His art wasn't even any good.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It had been two whole years since I last felt my cheeks ease on their own.

The way he pursed his lips as he painted was so carefree, so utterly mundane, that it was almost comical.

What should I do? What's he doing?

I couldn't help but be curious. I slowly walked over.

"Hey, mind if I sit next to you?"

"Huh?"

The words were out before I could second-guess them. Talking to other patients in this ward wasn't exactly a good idea—not because it was forbidden, but because you usually didn't get a response. But this guy was so laid-back, the rule I'd followed for two years slipped my mind.

"Sure, but I've only got one chair."

He was even more carefree than I'd imagined. Brought me back to the kind of casual, aimless banter I hadn't had in years.

"No big deal, I'm good with the floor. Mind if I watch for a bit?"

"As long as you don't get in the way. You sure like poking around, huh?"

He threw me a sidelong glance before turning back to his canvas.

His gaze was a little intimidating—not intentionally, but his eyes had a sharp, almost piercing quality. I've got a baby face, so I couldn't help but admire him. He gave off the air of a street tough, and his personality felt refreshingly out of place here.

Which ward was he from? I hadn't seen him in Ward C, so it had to be either A or B. Probably A. Hard to picture someone who looked this healthy being from Ward B.

"So, which ward are *you* in?"

"Ward A. Sorry for squatting in B's territory. There's this scary lady back in A, you see, and I'd rather stay out of her eyeshot."

Now that I looked closer, he was covered in bruises.

I'm what they call a model patient, so I'd only heard the rumours, but apparently, some of the more rebellious patients were subjected to brutal inspections by a terrifying supervising doctor. Something told me he was a frequent flier there.

"Huh? Wait, you're missing an arm?"

"Yeah, lost it before I got here. That's why I'm stuck in this place."

"...Wow. That's... surprisingly normal."

The words slipped out before I could stop myself. It was true, though. Everyone else was here because they'd *gained* something. But this guy? He'd only lost his arm, like anyone else might. A regular patient, with a regular reason to be here.

"Oh, uh, I didn't mean it like that. I just—"

He blinked at me, then cracked a cheerful grin.

"Nah, don't sweat it. Negative yet positive. Makes sense that I'm in here."

His right hand, gripping the brush, danced swiftly across the canvas.

I watched him for a while. He wasn't painting because he had some grand vision. He was just someone killing time with whatever art supplies had fallen into his lap. Naturally, what he painted didn't matter—it was merely something to keep his mind occupied.

"So, what happened to your arm?"

"Huh? Which one? The one I've got, or the one I don't?"

"The former. It moves so effortlessly, I'm kinda in awe."

He blinked at me again.

...Was this guy actually kind of cute?

"The one I've got, huh? Usually, people ask about the missing one."

"Talking about what's not there doesn't mean much. I wanna know about the arm you *do* have. So how come you're that good with just one?"

He chuckled dryly.

"Well, when you've only got one, you figure it out."

He said it so casually, like it was second nature.

I wanted to ask more, but Brahms' Adagio began to play—the slow, classical tune that signaled the end of freedom for Ward C patients.

"Hey, will you be here tomorrow?"

"Maybe. Depends how I feel after the check-up. This painting's gonna take a while anyway."

Relieved, I stood up, said my goodbyes, and started back toward Ward C.

"Wait up. Let me jot this down. What's your name?"

"Huh?"

Turns out, he had a terrible memory. He made a habit of writing down anything important that happened during the day.

"I'm Hisaori Shinya. And you?"

"Shinya? Doesn't quite fit you, does it? Then again, who am I to judge?"

He scribbled two characters in the corner of his canvas.

"See? Weird name, isn't it? It's read as Arika."

The white-haired guy smirked, a mix of irony and pride.

And that's how I met Ishizue Arika, in my second year here.

Looking back, two of my few real friends were made within these walls.

One was this guy, of course.

The other was his sister, who'd later paint this hospital crimson.

▪▪▪

The hospital's wards, labeled A through D, each had strict checkpoints at their entrances.

Patients were afforded two tiers of liberty. The first was the freedom to leave their rooms—a privilege extended to patients like me and Ishizue, who hadn't been involved in violent episodes. The second tier, granted only to those in better standing with the institution, was the freedom to wander into neighbouring wards.

This was framed as part of the rehabilitation process, in an effort to help patients reintegrate into society by interacting with others. Of course, it was completely misguided. Most of us were barely holding ourselves together, much less capable of forming any meaningful connections.

The only real exceptions were me and Ishizue, though he was in a league of his own. He'd strike up a conversation with anyone, no matter their condition. Apparently, it had nearly gotten him killed a few times, but he never seemed to learn his lesson. His sense of self-preservation was practically nonexistent.

"What can I say? Ms. Mato told me to talk to as many patients as possible."

We were in the usual waiting room of Ward B.

Today, Ishizue was determined to finish his painting, though he looked thoroughly miserable about it.

"Ishizue, do you hate painting?"

"Hate's not the word I'd use. It's just that I don't get the appeal. Doc said he'd lend me some supplies if I was bored, so I gave it a shot. But this is the last day. I'm thinking of trying something like catch next time."

Ishizue was surprisingly diligent. Once he started something, he never left it unfinished. He claimed it was because he was afraid unfinished business might come back to haunt him.

"Lucky you, Ward A patients get to borrow stuff like that. I heard you guys even have TVs in your waiting rooms?"

"Yeah, but it's just boring local channels. Plus, there's a lot of competition for them. It's not as fun as it sounds. They're probably watching us from behind the walls anyway, taking notes on how we respond to outside media."

"...So it's not about entertainment. *We're* the ones being studied. Yeah. Not exactly a fun time."

"Right? From where I'm standing, your ward seems way more interesting. Well, except for Ward D. I'd never go there even if you paid me."

There was a rule—no one knew who made it—that patients could only move to adjacent wards.

Since I was in Ward C, I had access to B and D. But Ishizue, coming from Ward A, could only go as far as B. As a result, Ward A and D patients could never meet.

Naturally, the A–D classification indicated the progression of Agonist Disorder. A was mild, while D was severe.

◇

Ward A housed patients with lesions but non-visible mutations, or those who'd been injured by Possessed and left with lingering complications. I had a feeling Ishizue fell into the latter category.

His life, barring the lack of outpatients and limited free time, resembled a conventional hospital stay: three daily check-ups, a battery of tests, and the option to engage with other patients if desired.

He mentioned there being about twenty patients in Ward A, with mostly standard facilities, except for a special interrogation room used by the supervising doctors.

Ward B's criteria were less clear. From what I observed, its residents had visible mutations but relatively stable mental states, making them viable for treatment. Their lesions required surgical removal but weren't immediately fatal. Based on Dr. Roman's comments, they were waiting for the invention of methodologies precise enough to match their unique conditions.

Of course, given how each case manifested differently, research was at a snail's pace, akin to creating a new surgical method for every individual. Developing new drugs or techniques proved to be difficult, so surgeries were rare. And yet, Ward B housed the largest number of patients and boasted the most luxurious waiting room in the facility.

My ward, Ward C, housed patients whose Agonist Disorder, or Possession, had stabilized.

Ironically, we posed less of a threat than Ward B patients.

The most mentally compromised remained confined to their rooms, while the rest of us, those deemed stable enough, were granted freedom. However, physically mutated patients tended to stay in their rooms even if mentally stable, creating an empty prison atmosphere.

I ventured into Ward D only once.

If Ward C was a prison, then D was a crumbling ruin. Doctors and guards kept to the entrance, if they dared to enter at all. The ward was shrouded in perpetual twilight, a cave of shadows, as most patients recoiled from light.

At the time, escape was on my mind, and I'd hoped to map the place, but I couldn't even make it to the waiting room.

Ward D, as I came to understand it, was a terminus—for those beyond salvage or removal, whose mutations had reached completion. Only a handful, perhaps three, could still be considered 'alive.' The rest were simply… housed.

Thinking back, about six months ago, a patient was brought to Ward D, which triggered the most significant disruption the hospital had seen in two years. The entire facility was thrown into chaos. After a grueling three-day ordeal on the operating table, the patient, who'd been clinging to life by a thread, miraculously pulled through and was placed into Ward D. The surgeons described what they saw as a mangled wreck of flesh forcibly fed through a blender, which had endured against every conceivable odds.

Those were the sorts of monsters you'd come across in Ward D—a place beyond human comprehension, a realm of the inhuman.

◇

"So Ishizue, what do you think about the Possessed? Are they just victims of a terrible illness, or do you think they don't deserve to be called human anymore?"

Surrounded by a waiting room full of the living dead, I turned to the only person who still seemed alive. Thinking about Ward D had left me feeling impossibly small.

"Beats me. I ain't no doctor, so I wouldn't know what makes someone human. I mean, people change, right? Inside and out. If you didn't know who they were before, how would you even tell the difference?"

Fair enough. Even doctors didn't know what they were dealing with until they actually cut it open.

"For folk like us, just trying to make it through the day… I think if we can still connect, still understand each other, then that means we're still human, doesn't it?"

It was the gap between a scientist dissecting a body and a philosopher contemplating the heart of existence. Ishizue leaned toward the latter, or maybe he just didn't care much for rigid definitions in the first place.

"…I really envy you, Ishizue. If I'd had someone like you around, I might've actually gone to school. You're so easygoing. I bet if I borrowed money from you, you'd forget all about it by the next day."

"Oh, trust me, I would. But don't worry, I always write that kinda stuff down."

His brush dragged unevenly across the canvas, eighty percent of it already pitch black. With no discernible subject and numerous botched attempts, the accumulated layers had blurred into something vaguely resembling abstract art.

"Look, don't get hung up on it. Being Possessed is like catching a cold. And you can't fault someone for getting sick, can you? What really matters is what you do with it afterward."

Ishizue's words were laced with hollow idealism, the kind that came from someone still living in an ivory tower, but I could relate to the sentiment.

"Yeah. Comparing it to a cold works."

"Right? It's just one of those things anyone can get infected by if their luck is bad enough."

…He still didn't get it. The only people who caught colds were those with weakened immune systems.

"So, why bring it up? Isn't the word Possessed taboo around here?"

"No, I was just thinking about Ward D. It made me wonder if we're even human anymore."

His brush froze mid-stroke. Ishizue's usually charming face twisted, like he'd bitten into something rotten.

"Look, Hisaori. Whatever they drag into that monster graveyard… it's way beyond anything you're picturing. Just let it go. Don't think about it. Don't even mention it. Those are *real* devils down there. In medical terms, they're probably more alien than human."

"That's not what I heard. The doctors described the patient brought in six months ago as a girl, around fourteen, like a blooming flower. Even said she really pulled off a gothic Lolita dress."

"Don't buy into Roman's crap. He's just some freak with an incurable disease, one by the name of pedophilia. And for the record, it was a wedding dress. The black they saw? That was just blood."

"Huh? How'd you even know all that?"

"Well, duh. I got here six months ago too, remember?"

Oh, right. That made sense.

The clumsy brushstrokes resumed.

It was a peculiar sight. Despite how atrocious the painting looked, Ishizue's right arm moved with a fluid, almost graceful precision.

He was remarkably unguarded, fielding any question I lobbed at him with complete candor. Though eighty percent of his replies came with a grimace, tracking the shifts in his expression and deciphering the quiet inflections in his words was strangely satisfying.

"Ishizue, what were you up to before you came here?"

"Not much. I lived like a normal person, got hurt like a normal person, and finished off a monster like a normal person."

I scrutinized every detail of his movements, all the way down to the faint creases on his face. I withdrew awareness from my limbs, channeling it entirely into my eyes. At that moment, I existed solely as a pair of eyes.

"And before all that? You don't strike me as more than twenty. How far'd you make it in school?"

"About half a year into college. I'd just written this whole report about the people I'd met and stuff, but it all went to waste."

I subtly measured his pulse and breathing cadence.

Meaningless conversations and meaningful ones. I cycled between topics he enjoyed and those he disliked, continuously refining the mental sketch I held of him to align with the living model before me.

"You don't have a girlfriend, do you? You're not exactly the most lovable fellow."

"Hard to say. I think I did, but I don't remember."

Seriously? He didn't even remember that?

But his reactions were valuable, so I suppressed my frustration. There was so much to observe. Even the silent moments held significance. Bit by bit, I was aligning the Ishizue in my mind with the real one. This kind of meticulous work turned out to be rather fun.

Music began to play, and the corpses in the waiting room started to disperse. It must've been Ward B's sonata, since Ishizue remained unperturbed.

Today, too, we'd have to say our goodbyes in a few minutes.

"Hey, Ishizue. What's your take on God?"

I tossed out the question, testing the waters to see if I oughta take a page from his book. I'd already decided he was a friend worth keeping forever, but there were still lines I hadn't dared to cross. This needed clearing up.

"...Where'd that come from? How did we even get here?"

"Well, you know. If there are devils, there's gotta be a God, right?"

"Oh, that kind of thing. Nah, I wasn't brought up on any of that. Not too into that Buddha fella either. But if you wanna talk God, the doc could wax poetic about it 'til sunrise."

"I'm not asking for a definition or whether you believe in Him. I'm just curious—what do you picture when you hear the word 'God'?"

"Nothing. Just... emptiness. Devoid of shape, shadow, scent, or texture."

He truly perceived God as an intrinsic emptiness, not something to be ridiculed, but a fundamental absence. While I didn't share his view, it was barely within the realm of what I could tolerate. A perspective I didn't relate to but could understand.

"And you, Hisaori? Do *you* believe in God?"

"It's not so much about belief as it is about reverence. Not for God per se, but for what He represents. Ishizue, if you had to give shape to God, what form would He take?"

"...That's a tricky one. Like trying to paint the sky, right? Well, if we're talking sheer grandeur... maybe eyes? Or light?"

His answer came instantly. Exactly the kind of unfiltered honesty I'd come to expect from the Ishizue in my mind—no fake smiles for things he didn't care about.

"For me, it'd be a hand. If God truly granted humanity wisdom, then the human hand is the most fitting embodiment of Him."

"Huh? You mean like personification?"

"...More like wisdom made tangible. What sets us apart from animals are our five-fingered hands, right?"

"I'm even more lost now. Isn't wisdom all in the brain? That's where all our smarts come from."

"That's a bit reductive. Animals have brains too, you know? Besides, human wisdom might as well be useless to them. Just because something functions differently doesn't necessarily make it better. Our brains are just there to move our hands, aren't they?"

...*Crap.*

He was eyeing me with a look of mild bewilderment. It was a novel reaction, and though it stung slightly, I decided to postpone any frustration. Having fun took precedence.

"...All right, fine. But if that's the case, wouldn't that mean we've lost sight of God ourselves?"

"Bingo. But hey, we wouldn't be possessed by devils if that weren't the case."

Ishizue's arm, moving with a life of its own, stilled. He put down his brush and muttered, "Guess that's it."

"Huh? You're finished already?"

"Any more, and the whole thing's gonna turn black. Besides, I'm probably due for recall soon. Feels like a good place to leave it."

He started packing up the art supplies that had been squatting in the waiting room all week. Had I struck a nerve earlier?

"Hey, Ishizue. What're you gonna do with the painting?"

"Dunno, don't need it. I'll probably hand it off to the doc. It'll wind up in the incinerator in a couple of years anyway."

"Yikes, that's cold. Let me have it, then. I won't pretend it's a masterpiece, but I'd like to have it on my wall."

He blinked, visibly reluctant. In the end, he seemed to have decided it wasn't worth the trouble of carrying the canvas back to his room.

"Fine. But just so you know, no returns."

"Got it. And don't come claiming it later, okay?"

Ishizue cleaned up deftly with just his right hand and headed back to Ward A.

I looked at the finished painting.

Eighty percent of the canvas was drowned in black. At first glance, it looked like a butterfly with spread wings, but on closer inspection, the theme was simpler. In the corner, a scrawled note read "Ishizue Arika," and beneath it, two children holding hands.

◇

As patients' conditions deteriorated, their daily routines became more and more fragmented.

Wake-up call at six, breakfast by seven. After that was just a regular check-up, and then you were left alone until lunch and dinner. That was the standard even in my ward, Ward C, so I could only guess how far things had gone off the rails in Ward D—I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd scrapped meals altogether.

The only patients whose days bore any resemblance to standard hospital life were the A and B bunch. Ishizue always seemed so laid-back, but unlike me, his only downtime came at lunch.

His day started off like mine—wake-up call, breakfast—but after that, he was shuttled non-stop between internal medicine, surgery, psychotherapy, forced discourse with other patients, exercise to stay somewhat fit, and the glorified

interrogations that the supervising doctors called check-ins. His hours were spoken for, down to the last tick. He couldn't skip out, either, since the hospital enforced it all.

I could understand the check-ups, sure, but I couldn't for the life of me see what anyone got out of a marathon. Even so, seeing Ishizue dragged through it all put me on edge. To try and keep up with him, I decided to adopt a similar schedule to the best of my abilities.

And maybe it paid off. For the first time since I'd been admitted, I was summoned to the torture chamber—I mean, the examination room—in Ward A.

"I suppose this isn't our first meeting. We crossed paths when you were first brought in. Sit down. Don't waste my time."

The so-called examination room was far too cavernous and sterile to justify its name. The ceiling stretched high overhead, and a glass-walled observation booth loomed above like an upper floor. I felt like a lone white pawn dropped into the middle of an Othello board.

The room itself was on a slant, with the patient entrance at the lower end and the entrance the woman had used at the higher. In the middle of that incline sat a single desk, flanked by two chairs facing each other. Perched in the higher one was a woman in a fitted suit.

Touma Mato. Ishizue called her Ms. Mato or Ms. Tomato, but to me, she was just a busted hag in her late twenties.

She sat there like a lord of hell glaring down at a condemned soul. Most people would shrink in a space like that, but she weaponized the size to amplify her own presence. I'd heard that Ms. Mato in the examination room seemed three times larger than usual, but I hadn't believed it until now.

"Honestly, you siblings are a real handful. Heard the news about your folks yet? The final ruling came through yesterday. Hisaori Koji and Hisaori Kayo's deaths have been ruled as accidents. Congratulations, you're officially off the hook. And, if your condition improves, you might even be discharged."

"....."

I blinked, stunned. Whatever was on my face must've looked like genuine surprise.

"...Um, what do you mean, 'if my condition improves'? Does that mean I can be cured?"

"You got a damn screw loose? Obviously not. I'm talking about your mental state. Whether you understand the weight of nearly destroying someone is what matters here."

...Terrifying. It wasn't just what she said, but the way her eyes bore into me.

This woman, offering me what sounded like a miracle, didn't see me as human at all. She was poised to throw the switch on my chair at the slightest twitch, yet she looked right through me. I'd have preferred being treated like dirt.

"...So if I'm deemed mentally stable, I can leave?"

"Yeah. Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? We're not running a charity here, you know. Can't just hemorrhage taxpayer funds. Most people would rather that money end up padding their own wallets. Do you get it, Hisaori? Just how much do you think it costs to keep a waste of space like you here? Frankly, I don't see the point in housing Ward C patients who are never going to recover."

After all, housing them was no different from providing their basic needs. I'd have rather kept my mouth shut for the entire conversation, but if Ishizue could stomach it, I sure wasn't about to fold.

"...Will I receive any social security after being discharged? I'm guessing you're gonna turn me into a poster child for Possessed reintegration?"

"Sharp, aren't you? Bingo. Two years ago, there was a huge human rights debate. This isn't so much about the patients' well-being as it is a hospital PR move. We've been corralling Possessed from all over the country under the banner of hospitalization, but a few eyebrows are bound to raise once we haven't signed off on a single release in a decade."

It made sense. They'd handpicked a few safe-to-release patients, and I happened to be among them.

Two years prior, a significant debate arose regarding the classification of Possessed patients, with factions arguing for victim status versus perpetrator designation. Rumour had it that some influential backers had thrown their weight behind the conservative victim-rights camp, and the hospital had come dangerously close to being shut down. The behind-the-scenes fight was still simmering.

"Well, that's only part of it. The real issue is money. Our initial funding dried up this year, so we've gotta offload patients who aren't earning their keep, whether they're guinea pigs or just money pits. Time and money might seem endless, but we'd rather cut corners where we can."

She was laying it on thick, just to make sure I understood the harsh reality.

Don't get it wrong: the hospital doesn't see you as human. Don't ever think you'll be normal again, even once you've been released.

"...I understand. So if I keep playing the model patient, I'll be up for discharge?"

"Yes. We need at least five. Keep up the goody-two-shoes act for another year, and I'll personally recommend you. Great news, isn't it? You won't even have to pretend to feel sorry. Just don't screw it up."

"...It's not an act. I really *do* feel remorse."

"Very well, Tsuranui's efforts must be paying off. That said, you've been looking awfully cheerful lately. It's plain as day, even through the monitors. Found a new plaything, have you?"

...Her gaze alone made me sick to my stomach. If I ever made it out of this place, she'd be the first I'd put to rest. Baseless intuition never sat well with me, but I felt it in the marrow of my bones. If I didn't act first, *I'd* be the one in danger.

"Um... is Ishizue also up for discharge?"

"What?"

For a moment, that King Yama-like pressure that Touma Mato usually radiated faltered. Rumour had it that Ishizue was her favourite toy, but something about her reaction felt off.

"He's the leading candidate, but I'm opposed to his release."

She spat it out, her composure cracking only in the slightest. I caught a subtle muscle twitch, a flicker of pity only I would notice. She wasn't holding back his release because he was a threat, but because she pitied him.

"Dr. Mato, what about my case? Recommendation doesn't guarantee approval, does it? I may be a suitable candidate, but how do you actually feel about releasing me?"

"Oh, you're fine. You've got the strength, and, more importantly, the utility to boot. You'd thrive anywhere. Once all this wraps up, I might even keep you on as my personal pawn."

She flashed a predatory grin, her eyes glinting. Truly chilling.

That was her honest assessment. This woman didn't lie, even to her own infected patients, and not once would she ever let sentiment cloud her judgement. One slip-up, and she'd slice through any excuse, bringing down the hammer. That was Touma Mato.

Either way, the conversation had gone better than expected. According to her, Ishizue could be out in six months, and I could follow within a year. A stroke of luck, for sure.

"Oh, one last thing. The hospital has a favour to ask. A patient in Ward D put in a request to meet with you. You've been granted visitation rights, so make sure you drop by tomorrow. Here's some paper and ink, just in case you feel like penning a will."

Of course, it wasn't a request, but an order.

...Damn, after almost two years here, I'd nearly forgotten.

Good news always came with a price.

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Accompanied by the hospital director, Dr. Roman, and three heavily armed guards—not wardens, mind you—I headed to Ward D for the visitation.

Refusal wasn't in the cards, and I considered it an opportunity to curry a bit of goodwill. Besides, a sliver of curiosity had taken root. The patient requesting my presence was that recent arrival, admitted six months prior. Touma Mato didn't seem

particularly invested, yet the hospital was treating the whole affair like it was a matter of life and death.

Later, in the solitude of my room, I endured a protracted lecture from the aforementioned hospital director. It surprised me that such a figure existed here, and even more so that the hospital, supposedly in control, was so deferential to this particular patient. The director subsequently escorted me to Ward D's waiting room, then beat a hasty retreat back to Ward C.

...If even Ward C felt like a haven in comparison, Ward D had to be something else entirely.

The immediate impression was one of pervasive decay. Though the floors and walls mirrored those of other wards, they exuded a fragility like the remnants of a decades-old ruin.

"Let's proceed. And please, refrain from unnecessary chatter. There are other patients here."

Even Dr. Roman seemed visibly tense.

The guards, meanwhile, carried submachine guns with an almost casual air. It bordered on the absurd. *Were we storming the Arc de Triomphe?*

Thud.

The building felt as if it teetered on the brink of collapse. With each step, the faint shiver of decay seemed to echo in my ears—mere fancy, of course. Ward D, the hospital's priciest wing, built to cradle the terminally ill, could hardly be so fragile.

The long, narrow hallway stretched, an endless, featureless plane. Every six metres, a crossroads opened, each fork a perfect repetition of the last in an infinite corridor. Ward D was a maze, a labyrinth of intersections.

It was like being trapped within a die, a grey world steeped in the pallid luminescence of electric light. No windows, no doors, not even a hint of patient rooms. Only ashen walls, as though conjured from a surreal painting. Walking through them felt like bleeding into the canvas itself.

Dr. Roman took three turns, then guided us left. I had long since lost any sense of direction. For an instant, I lagged a step behind, catching sight of the upcoming hallway.

Thud.

A reddish-black corridor. Upon closer inspection, it was a grotesque construction of corpses. The concrete had morphed into conduits of living flesh, within which squirmed the forms of my mother, her throat a scarlet ruin, and my father, weeping rivulets of blood from his eyes.

Ah… if that was the case, then I would soon join *them*.

True to that morbid premonition, the sight of Hisaori Shinya, on the verge of tears, took shape before me.

"Hisaori, not that way."

Dr. Roman snapped me back to reality before I could take another step forward.

Thud.

"Please refrain from peering into any unrelated hallways. While we may not sense it, some patients here can exert a negative influence on the infected."

I pressed him on the nature of that influence.

"Well, for instance, the patient in the room you just glimpsed has already been tied to two disappearances."

Patients, like myself, had unwittingly let their eyes drift toward the wrong corner, entered those rooms, and vanished. It was clear the denizens of Ward D had concealed them. The real questions were where and how? Were the bodies compressed and stuffed beneath beds, or were they consumed, digested slowly within another's living flesh? When pressed for answers, one patient had simply grinned, saying, "You wanna know where they are? They're squirming around inside my brain."

Thud.

I made certain to keep Dr. Roman within my line of sight as we pressed on.

The person I was about to meet was a girl of fourteen. A Possessed patient, admitted with her body reduced to a mutilated pulp. Her limbs were almost entirely gone, her torso practically minced. By some improbable miracle, she had clung to life, though even for a Possessed—one afflicted with Agonist Disorder—death was usually an irreversible finality. At best, her remaining days would be spent confined to a bed. At worst, she might exist merely as a brain suspended in a tank, deemed 'alive' by the hospital's clinical definition.

Thud.

Indeed, such grim rumours were commonplace in Ward D.

There was a whispered tale of the indoor pool, filled to its brim with what appeared to be internal organs, all belonging to a single patient who was still technically alive, making their removal an impossibility. The pool's door remained tightly sealed, leaving the truth shrouded in ambiguity—or perhaps it was simply a truth no one had the stomach to uncover.

Either way, the fact that this girl had specifically requested to see me suggested a capacity for coherent conversation. Even if the worst-case scenario was a girl reduced to only her head, I consciously composed my features into an expression of calm neutrality, determined not to betray any shock.

Thud.

Dr. Roman opened yet another door, revealing a narrow hallway that seemed to signify the journey's end. Approximately ten metres ahead stood another steel door.

"Once you enter, this door will lock behind you. We'll be here waiting, so don't hesitate to speak your mind. Oh, and one more thing. After this door closes, the inner door will open with a one-minute lag."

Their precautions were certainly thorough. This felt less like a visitation and more like the prelude to an execution.

"...Uh, just a thought," I ventured, gesturing towards the guards' weapons, "but any chance I could borrow one of those? You know, for self-defence."

"Hahaha, come off it. You're not stepping into any lion's den. Besides, the guns are just for show. Bullets wouldn't even graze her. The only truly effective measure is, as you can see, multiple layers of steel walls."

"....."

Thud.

I instantly regretted my flicker of bravado. I had traded my curiosity for my life.

I walked down the narrow passage, and the door behind me slammed shut.

Thud.

A minute later, the final door slid open.

Thud.

"...Huh?"

For a moment, I felt as though I had stumbled through time. Or perhaps I had unknowingly died and now stood in some strange, fantastical afterworld.

Beyond the threshold sprawled a gymnasium. A ruined gymnasium, to be precise. The cavernous shell of an abandoned school, with stark concrete-reinforced walls, stretched before me. Suspended from the nearly eight-metre ceiling, in the very centre of the room, hung a human-sized bagworm.

Thud.

Ah, it flew.

The bagworm, tethered to a long chain, swung like a pendulum and crashed against the concrete wall.

Thud.

It swung back, as pendulums do, only to be caught mid-arc by a figure standing in the gymnasium's heart. The bagworm was, in fact, a sandbag, and the one driving gloved fists into it was, beyond any doubt, a girl of floral beauty.

"Whoa, you're here already! Hi, Hisaori! Great to meet you! Just gimme a sec, okay? I'm just about done with today's quota."

Thud.

She planted her feet firmly and drove her right fist into the sandbag. It rocketed upward like a breaching dolphin, banging against the towering eight-metre ceiling.

This was the Possessed brought in six months ago, deemed beyond all hope of recovery. A fourteen-year-old girl who could easily've passed for twenty. And she was Ishizue's younger sister.

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"Overall, I'd say they're pretty tough, don't you think?"

That, in a single sentence, was her summation of Agonist Disorder patients. We hit it off almost instantly; her remarks echoed unspoken thoughts I'd long carried.

"Me? I got hauled in by that woman the very day after I got sick. She went nuts, filled me full of lead, and stabbed a buncha holes into me. If she hadn't been after samples, I'd have ended up with my head skewered like a kebab."

Her presence was so overwhelming it bordered on the unreal. If the patients in Ward C were ghosts or corpses, then she was, without question, a monster. Even here in Ward D, still tethered to some semblance of reality, she felt like a character ripped from the pages of a manga—utterly absurd.

Later, Ishizue Arika would sum it up perfectly: "If Ms. Mato is a master, then my sis is a superhuman."

That categorization was spot on. From a medical standpoint, she was no longer human. And yet, this monster had been driven to the brink of death half a year ago by Touma Mato's hand.

"Yeah. Can't exactly plead youthful indiscretion. Her showing up back then honestly felt like the universe smacking me for looking down on real life."

She grinned a small, almost sheepish smile as she pulled off her boxing gloves, her long raven hair cascading like silk. She was the polar opposite of Ishizue Arika. This was the embodiment of peerless beauty.

"So, that about sums up how I ended up here. If you asked me, the only takeaway from all this is: If you value your life, don't trifle with that woman unless you're me. Anyway, your turn, Hisaori."

I recounted the incident from two years prior, wanting her to understand the full context, so I began at the very beginning.

The story of Hisaori Shinya, who killed his parents—no, wait, it had since been officially ruled an accident—so, the story of Hisaori Shinya, who allowed his parents to die and then, in a moment of panic, pushed his sister, Hisaori Makina, who had

tried to save them, off the apartment building. She'd survived the fall, but her right arm had been crushed beyond repair. Her life spared at the cost of a limb.

"That's rough. Nothing ever goes right for you, does it, Hisaori?"

Yeah. No matter what I did, nothing ever seemed to work out. Even during the incident, everything had appeared to be progressing smoothly, only for me to find myself back at square one when the dust settled. It was like winning the jackpot only to find out the prize was bankruptcy. The game itself seemed designed to ensure no one could truly come out on top.

"Hmm. You like playing musical chairs, Hisaori?"

I never quite grasped the appeal of games in general. I didn't recall ever winning even something as simple as musical chairs. Knowing my inevitable loss, I'd always preferred to observe rather than participate.

The allure of the chair eluded me, and I held no particular admiration for those who ultimately claimed it. I was content to sit on the floor, a silent observer of those who managed to rise to the top.

"Dumbass... So long, Shinya."

But then, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

"I see. Well, you'd best be careful from now on. Try not to stumble upon the perfect chair, yeah?"

"Huh?"

"You're just a spectator, aren't you? All the chairs have been taken, so there isn't any seat left for you, Hisaori. But if you were to find the perfect chair, you'd have to push someone off to sit on it. That's the basic rule, right? It's totally fine to be an observer, but if you start craving a seat for yourself, you'll revert to that ugly Possessed

you once were. You're here precisely 'cuz you couldn't keep your desires in check. You'll be putting yourself in grave danger if you ever start coveting that chair."

So, heed my warning, the girl five years my junior warned. *Unless you erase the one already there, that seat will never be yours.*

But that's a concern that holds no weight for me. Not once have I looked at any chair and felt even the faintest stirring of longing.

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After that, our conversation slipped into a far more girlish tone. We talked for close to an hour, and before I finally rose from the floor, we'd struck a deal to meet once a week.

"Oh, by the way, how'd you even hear about me? It's not like you can leave this place, can you?"

"Ah, that? Well, you've been talking with my brother, right? That's how I figured it out. Kinda had a feeling it was you. There's actually something I've been meaning to ask."

She flashed me a teasing flick of her tongue. For all her earlier poise and grown-up composure, she ended it with a devilish grin.

"Say, is there anything you can do to hold off my brother's discharge?"

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Naturally, I couldn't take her up on that request.

I might've been willing to throw a few rocks in Ishizue Arika's way, maybe even go out on a limb for his sister, but anything that'd put me in the firing line would only push back my own release. No, knowing that hag, she'd probably blacklist me from being discharged for the rest of my days.

At the crossroads between Ishizue and his sister's wishes, I had no real way to grant hers.

Well. In the end, it wasn't a mess I needed to get tangled up in anyway.

"Hey, Ishizue. Playing shogi today?"

"Hm?"

Ishizue, engrossed in a shogi puzzle, looked up at me with a genuinely puzzled expression, as if seeing me for the very first time.

"You okay? It's me, Hisaori."

"Hisaori? Oh, right. Now that you mention it, you *do* have Hisaori's features. Sorry, took me a second to place you. I only ever catch you in daylight, after all. So, what's the deal? Get yourself into an accident?"

"Oh, this? Just the aftermath of surgery. They removed a part that's been giving me trouble for a while."

"I see," Ishizue nodded, jotting something down with surprising finesse for a one-handed guy.

"I came to say goodbye. We won't be seeing much of each other anymore."

Even though the ward remained unchanged, time continued its relentless march forward. Despite our continued rejection of the world outside, it seemed the world itself was strangely indulgent, irresponsibly extending a hand to those who'd long since fallen behind.

"I see. You *were* always a strange one. Around here, it's practically taboo to talk to other patients, y'know? They say if the infected talk, the one who starts it gets possessed by a devil."

"You're one to talk, Ishizue. I only strike up conversations with people who seem capable of holding one, but you? You'll talk to absolutely anyone. I've been meaning to ask, but why don't you have any sense of danger?"

"Well, I guess that's just one of my defects."

"...And being forgetful isn't one?"

"That one's manageable, so it's fine. It's not all that bad."

It wasn't ever anything *but* bad, though. How utterly careless of him. No wonder his sister was constantly at her wit's end.

"More importantly, I've been meaning to ask you, Hisaori. Why'd you strike up a conversation with me? Most people here can't even muster the will to care about others."

To be precise, I think they're just too wrapped up in themselves.

"Well, that's true. But my interest's always been in other people."

"Huh," Ishizue's solitary game came to an abrupt halt. With his one good arm, the white-haired man regarded me with eyes that betrayed not the slightest flicker of curiosity.

"Why's that?"

"Perhaps because I'm not supposed to dwell on it. Call it a temper, if you want. Ever since I was a kid, I've never been good at managing my own emotions. If I felt anger or sadness, it'd gnaw at me until I resolved whatever sparked it."

For instance, if a poignant story moved me deeply, the intensity of that sadness would become all-consuming. Only by resolving or deconstructing the very narrative that evoked such feelings within me could I find release.

As a child, I could still navigate the world as a functional human being, but by the end of elementary school, my sense of self began to unravel. Since my own emotions proved to be my greatest adversary, I made a conscious choice to detach from them, if only as a stopgap measure.

"That sounds rough. Was that temper something you were born with?"

"Guess I always had the wiring for it, but it really became obvious around fifth grade. I don't remember it all that well, but according to my mom, I started acting kind of strange after seeing what I thought was a ghost in broad daylight. We lived on the third floor of an apartment complex, you see. And I was there on the balcony, going, 'Dad, Dad, look! Someone's on fire over there,' over and over."

"That's one hell of a story. The person on fire—were they, you know, alive?"

"Yeah, they were. Walked calmly across the courtyard, completely engulfed in black flames. I could probably reason it out now, but to a kid, what else could it've been but a ghost?"

Ishizue furrowed his brow. Even though his sister had since become my closest friend, I felt a pang of regret. He was listening to my story not as some far-fetched tale, but as something that had genuinely occurred. The troubled look he wore held genuine sympathy for the child who'd witnessed it.

And then, an adagio. The same dull, soothing music from our first encounter began to play softly.

"Ah, I should probably get going. This is goodbye, then. Farewell handshake?"

I extended my right hand.

"Sorry. I don't shake hands."

A flat refusal.

It wasn't a rejection of Hisaori Shinya himself, but of the very act of physical contact. Ishizue seemed to have a deep aversion to it.

Well, that's too bad.

Everyone has a thing or two that bothers them, and given our conditions, a proper handshake would've been out of the question anyway. So, without touching, we simply said our goodbyes.

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A few days later, the doctor explained Ishizue's condition to me—how he lost all memory of the daytime.

"Ah, I see," I murmured, and suddenly so much clicked into place.

His forgetfulness, the seemingly random way it manifested—it was all because of that, wasn't it?

"....."

Once the realisation sank in that I'd never see him again, it struck me that he truly *did* belong in that ward.

Ishizue Arika, in a sense, was reborn with each new day. Incomplete as he was, he existed entirely in the now. And yet, he lived so fully, so vividly human. A man without a solid present, his purpose anchored in the future.

While his sister might've possessed a monstrous physique, Ishizue Arika was perhaps the strongest in spirit. It was a trait I lacked, and, maybe, just maybe, was exactly what I needed.

Anyway, here's where the hospital chapter of my story came to a close.

My own discharge was still some time away. But I made a silent promise that if we both ever gained our freedom, my first visit would be to Ishizue. Luckily, we were from the same prefecture.

Life has a strange way of making such encounters happen, so I might just run into him if I managed to stay alive long enough.

1 / Hide (R)

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I don't mean to brag, but... my reintegration into society was about as perfect as a train wreck could get.

"All right. You're free to leave today."

And with that, Ms. Mato breezed off, muttering something about being swamped and catching up later. *Ugh, seriously? Was it always going to be this anticlimactic?* I'd braced myself for some major drama, but here I was, already done with the discharge process. It was almost disappointingly out of character considering her usual flair.

"...Hey, Doc. I know I'm the one leaving, but doesn't this all feel a little too easy?"

With barely an hour left before my release, I swung by the doctor's office, pretending to say a final goodbye but mostly wanting to vent.

"Isn't that a good thing? Shows that Ms. Mato cares about you in her own way. She has a soft spot for people in vulnerable positions, you see."

"*Ugh*. That's some *serious* bullshit. Now I'm more worried about *you*, Doc. Your taste in women is abysmal."

If that was her idea of kindness, then Touma Mato's brand of affection was fundamentally warped. Maybe *she* was the one who's actually Possessed?

"Well, we can dissect Ms. Mato another time. More importantly, since you're here, I'm guessing you've got something else on your mind?"

"...Bingo. See, the thing is... I've been cooped up here for so long, I've developed a bit of a complex. I want to take things slow out there, you know?"

"Hahaha. 'I can't fit into the world.' That was practically your catchphrase when you first arrived, wasn't it?"

"This isn't a joke. That part of me hasn't changed since then. Look, out there, everyone's scrambling for fame and success, right? ...I get it, I do. If you want to get by, that's all you need. I was even told that I'd be able to blend in if I could dedicate myself to that kind of stuff. But for some reason, I just can't bring myself to play that part."

...Ugh, how effeminate did that sound? Since Touma Mato hadn't given me her usual kick in the teeth on the way out, I guess I was fishing for a few words of encouragement instead.

"That's a problem. If you want to make it out there, you're going to have to learn to play along. Well, let me put it this way. The reason people try to dominate others, to chase money, fame, and power, is simply because they crave recognition. They want to prove their superiority, to clearly establish their own worth. Do you understand that?"

"I do. But I just don't get what's so important about that stuff."

"Of course not. You don't believe you have any inherent value to begin with."

"....."

Did I mess up? Doc was being surprisingly blunt today.

"Listen. Those who weren't loved unconditionally, those who were persecuted by society, tend to lose sight of their own worth. Because they weren't loved, because they weren't given a place to belong, they struggle to believe they have any value at all. People like those live their lives in constant self-loathing. That void, that sense of lacking, can feel impossible to fill. This disadvantage is something an individual can never overcome on their own. And there's only one solution. If you can't find value within yourself, then you need to connect with someone who sees it in you. What you need isn't confidence, it's someone who needs you. Spend your life searching for that. *That's* what you should live for."

"....."

...Wow.

I'd clearly been selling Doc too short all these years. I couldn't even bring myself to blush at how unexpectedly romantic that sounded. Whoever nicknamed him Doctor Roman might've been a genius.

But putting that aside, his words actually resonated. I didn't fully understand them, but I could tell that it was good advice. After all, it couldn't get any more clear and straightforward than that.

"So, basically, I just need to find someone I click with, huh? But do you really think I'll find someone that convenient?"

"Hahaha. I can't guarantee that much. Oh, by the way, did you make any friends while you were here?"

I nodded.

"Then it wouldn't hurt to hold onto hope, would it?" the doctor chuckled casually.

Still... I had made friends, yes, but the thought that they might've already forgotten me made it pointless in my mind.

"Well, it looks like you're being summoned. Head up to the rooftop of Ward A. If you'd like, I can walk you to the helipad. I imagine carrying your luggage alone might be a bit of a struggle."

"No, I'm fine. I'm not a kid, and it's only one bag. Wait a second... did you just say something crazy? I feel like I just heard the word 'helipad.'"

"Oh, did Ms. Mato not inform you? This hospital can only be accessed from the air. In other words, the rooftop is the main entrance."

"...I see. No wonder no one ever breaks out."

Or rather... now that I truly considered it, this place wasn't really a hospital at all—it was a prison in every sense of the word.

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Patients with Agonist Disorder were barred from relocating to other prefectures. The rationale was clear: individuals deemed dangerous needed to be meticulously managed, monitored, and controlled by the state. Thus, upon my discharge, I was returned to my old stomping grounds—Shikura City in C Prefecture.

The journey involved a three-hour transfer, switching from a helicopter to a car along the way. I'd half-expected some dramatic blindfolding or the like, but no such theatrics occurred. Just a bland, procedural handoff, akin to some delinquent kid on probation.

Even with the speed of the highway, the mere three-hour return to my former home underscored just how real that hospital ward had been. Turns out, different worlds weren't so distant after all—merely an hour away if one was determined enough.

"Your relatives have declined to take you in, so you'll be placed in a facility. All your driving licenses have been revoked. As for your residence certificate, health insurance card, and other miscellaneous documents, you'll need to collect them later from the designated government office."

The explanation came in a flat, unwavering monotone from the stiff figure in the black suit, sunglasses, and buzz cut sitting beside me.

The government provided housing for Agonist Disorder patients, along with those who'd been on the receiving end of their harm. It was essentially public housing: a single, aging apartment building run by the city, originally intended as a shared facility for the disabled and low-income earners, now repurposed for people like me.

That said, I was the first discharged patient to move into it. They'd probably take in more down the road, but for now, it remained a residence for society's more vulnerable members.

The monthly rent was a shockingly low four-digit figure. For those infected and unemployed, even basic food expenses were covered. The catch? You were assigned a watchdog, like Buzz Cut over here, and any time something shady happened in the neighbourhood, you'd be hauled in for questioning.

"Well then, the manager will see to the rest of the procedures. Once a day, either at 9:00 AM or 6:00 PM, call this number."

Buzz Cut didn't bother spelling out what would happen if I failed to call, just turned on his heel and vanished from the dilapidated apartment complex without another word.

All right then. I adjusted my bag and looked up at the decrepit building.

Six stories of reinforced concrete that resembled a cramped apartment block more than any proper condo, with windows jammed so close together that there had to be at least eight units per floor. The entrance was narrow, filthy, and claustrophobic—the kind of place that practically screamed "Yakuza only; everyone else piss off."

"...Yeah. This'll do."

Compared to that hospital, the grime inside and out didn't matter in the slightest.

Woo-hoo! Congrats, me! Farewell, my grey days of hospitalization! Here's to my brand-new life in this dump: Shikura City's 13th Welfare Housing Complex!

"Oh, you the new guy? ...Huh. Wear whatever you want, I don't care. Just don't cause trouble. Here's your key. Power and water get switched on tomorrow, so don't come complaining tonight."

And just like that, my grand fresh start was soured within seconds of arriving.

"Real friendly old hag, huh..."

But honestly, that suited me just fine.

The place was every bit as badly run as it looked. The manager was beyond neglectful, and unless I went out of my way to pester her, she'd never darken my doorstep.

Humming to myself at the sheer convenience, I made my way up to my third-floor room. No nameplate, nothing. The door groaned ominously as I pushed it open, sounding like thirty long years of wear and tear.

"Oh? New neighbour?"

As I wrestled with the stubborn doorknob, a lanky guy appeared. For someone holed up in a dump like this, he was oddly cheerful—the kinda guy who looked like he should be sipping cocktails on some tropical beach. A man in his thirties with garish makeup. *Lose the Hawaiian shirt, dude. It suits you way too well.*

"Ah, so I finally have a neighbour too! Name's Niijima. And you?"

"Hey. It's Ishizue. First name's Arika, spelled with the characters for 'place' and 'exist'."

"Oh, my. Cute name for a kid, huh? Fufufu," Niijima chuckled.

Later, I'd learn that his name was the *real* joke—but that's a story for another time.

"Nice to meet ya. I'll let you know if I ever need help."

"Yeah, yeah. It's nice having some fresh blood around, but... Arika dear, you're not really my type, y'know?"

Good. Gay guys in Hawaiian shirts weren't exactly my type either.

▪▪▪

Before I knew it, a full month had slipped by.

Between grocery runs, exploring the neighbourhood around my apartment, and the endless job hunt, I'd been so wrapped up in soaking in my newfound freedom and settling into this new life that something important had fallen completely off my radar.

I'd been too carefree. Careful, yes—avoiding old acquaintances, steering clear of familiar haunts—but I'd overlooked something fundamental.

"...Yeah. I should've gone back home at least once."

The Ishizue residence was a standalone house in the second district of Shikura Hills. Located on the opposite side of the station, about an hour on foot, twenty-plus minutes by bus, or twenty by car.

Towns are funny like that—compact yet somehow vast. In modern society, unless you had a direct connection to someone, even residents on the opposite side of the station barely registered. Hell, you could practically live off a convenience store alone. Your whole world could shrink to just work, home, the store, and—if you were feeling daring—the bookstore, the pub, or the department store by the station.

So technically, there was no reason to set foot in the family home. But I knew if I didn't check in at least once, it'd come back to bite me sooner or later.

And so, late at night, when no one would likely see me, I made my way toward Shikura Hills.

True to its name, the residential area was a sleepy incline of houses, all dark past midnight. Under the weak spill of the streetlights, I trudged along.

Let's see... Kizaki, Ishimori, Yamanashi, Ishizue...

Most of the houses still had lights on—guess the folks around here were night owls. Except for one, sitting alone in the inky blackness. The Ishizue residence. Zero sense of welcome, that place.

"Ugh. Locked."

Dammit. Of course it was.

Turning back now would be a pain. But eh, whatever—it was probably empty anyway.

I circled around to the back, tried the kitchen window—and it slid open easily. A stroke of luck. Smashing the glass would've undoubtedly set the neighbours talking.

Sure, I could greet them with a cheerful "Long time no see," but it wasn't hard to imagine their reaction to a guy fresh out of the hospital. I was already fumbling through life one-handed—no need to pile on more social awkwardness.

"All right, thanks for having me."

I stepped inside my now-empty home for the first time since the incident.

"Huh? They fixed it up? Pretty sure this place was a bloodbath last time."

Guess they'd renovated it to put on the market once things cooled off. If that was the case, my room upstairs should've been fixed too. I climbed the stairs to the second floor. The door was brand new. Right. Ms. Mato's shotgun had blown the old one to splinters. That was the story.

"...Huh. They didn't bother much with the inside."

I surveyed the space that had once been Ishizue Arika's room.

Thud. I flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

"Oh. Bullet holes."

Real half-assed job, renovators. No way this place is fetching a decent price.

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I spent about three hours in the house, and any lingering homesickness completely evaporated. Exploring the familiar spaces allowed me to fully grasp the contours of my former life. Now, I was leaving behind what had once been my home—long uninhabited, newly redecorated.

I, too, had embarked on a new life. I suppose the house couldn't remain frozen in time forever. Eh, whatever. Not like it has anything to do with me.

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Two months in, even the most unfamiliar life starts to feel routine.

I'd grown attached to my cheap little 2DK in Complex 13, and I'd finally figured out how to navigate this town. It wasn't exactly luxurious, but it was enough. More than enough, really.

That left just one loose end.

Back in the isolation ward, Ishizue Arika had tried every prosthetic arm they'd offered. None of them fit right, so I'd stuck with my single arm. Now that I was out, I'd have to deal with that—pointless or not, I couldn't just ignore it.

My plan was simple: hit up the local medical suppliers, put in an order for a custom prosthetic, then head home and call it a day. Or that was the plan, anyway. Then I spotted something off in my rust-pitted mailbox.

"Huh. No sender."

A thick envelope—the expensive kind, the sort people use when mailing cash. Sealed tight with glue.

Frowning, I took it inside, flopped onto the bed, and tore it open.

A fat stack of 10,000-yen bills stared back at me. My first reaction wasn't elation but wariness. Because I sure as hell didn't remember anything that could possibly account for this.

"……"

Mind racing, I thumbed through the bills one-handed. Eighty of them. More than I made in a year.

"I should throw this—wait. Didn't I owe Niijima?"

Pathetic, but true: hospital stays always left one broke. The tragic side effect of being perpetually cash-strapped. And now here I was, staring down the barrel of some obvious, disastrous mistake—one I couldn't afford to shrug off.

"...Well, reporting it to the cops is definitely off the table."

My existence being remembered was fine, but my name going down in the books? No way. That'd wreck me.

"I'll sit on it for a couple of weeks. See where it goes."

Decision made: I'd keep it. It was obviously a mistake, so I'd just... hold onto it for now. If things got messy, I could always return it. Hell, even lost property becomes yours after six months, right?

"Or is it a year? And does it have to be the full amount?"

Not that it mattered. Because the next month, the same envelope showed up again. This time, shoved straight into my apartment's newspaper slot.

◇

"Arika dear, you're not mixed up in something dangerous, are you?"

"...Yeah. Morning to you too."

A scolding first thing in the morning.

Niijima, who'd just knocked on my door like it was a punching bag, took one look at my sleep-rumpled face and immediately started spouting nonsense. *I* was the one who had questions, considering the whole mysterious envelope situation still hadn't been resolved.

"What do you want, Niijima? I was just about to grab breakfast."

"Oh, perfect timing! Lucky you, Arika dear. You're about to get a free meal!"

"...The hell are you on about? Spit it out and make yourself scarce."

"It's about that prosthetic arm you've been looking for, dummy. You've got a visitor. Says he wants to talk business."

"...Huh?"

I scratched my head with one hand. What kinda salesman had this much time on his hands to track me down at home?

"Bad vibes already. He waiting in the lobby?"

"Nope. Said he'd be at the Malion across the street. Y'know, the café? Right on cue for their morning special."

"...Fine. I'd normally be bailing right about now, but it's another story when breakfast at the Malion's on the table."

Yup, time to grab me a free breakfast.

I threw on some clothes, passed the perpetually vacant manager's office, and headed out. Across from Complex 13 sat the Malion, a café with decent taste—if you overlooked the fact that your average plate set you back 800 yen, anyway.

The barista, a gruff-looking guy, greeted me with a "Welcome."

The salesman wasn't hard to spot—he was the only unfamiliar face at this hour.

"...Hey. You the one trying to sell me an arm?"

"Yes. I'm Yamada. Pleasure to meet you, Arika."

Male. Late thirties. A completely unremarkable gentleman.

I ordered the morning set and sat across from him.

"So, which hospital are you with?"

It'd been a month since I put in the prosthetic order, but none of the suppliers were supposed to deliver yet.

"Oh, I'm not affiliated with any hospital. This is more of a... separate matter. I heard you were searching for a high-quality prosthetic."

Ohhh. Now I got why Niijima was worried. This guy absolutely *reeked* of sketchiness.

"...I'll hear you out. But keep it short."

I had zero intention of agreeing, but since I'd already ordered, I was stuck until the bill came.

And as it turned out, his pitch wasn't just shady—it was also interesting. The gist was that some kid on the outskirts of Shikura City owned a rare prosthetic arm. One that might actually be a match for me.

Not that I could afford something like that—except, apparently, this kid was looking for a caretaker. If I took the job, I could borrow the prosthetic for free.

"...And how'd you find out about this?"

"Because until yesterday, *I* was their caretaker. Sadly, I was let go."

He sounded genuinely bummed.

"So you were fired? ...Huh. Not gonna pry, but what made you decide to approach me? Shouldn't you be pissed at them for axing you?"

"Perhaps. I could've just walked away, but... I suppose I can't help but pity the child. The guilt would gnaw at me if I left them without a replacement."

He laid out the job details—and the pay. 200,000 yen a month. Doubtful as I was, that was good money. And the best part? Zero chance of running into anyone from my past.

"...One question. Why me? You gotta realise how shady this looks, approaching someone like me."

"Because the child, much like yourself, is a Possessed."

...Ah. That made sense. Nobody *willingly* took care of Agonist Disorder patients.

"...This kid's not violent, are they?"

"They can't so much as lift a finger on their own. You'll be perfectly safe. You'll understand once you meet them."

Curiosity won. I grilled him for details, demolished my breakfast, and even got a refill on my tea.

Long story short? I figured I'd at least check the place out. I wasn't hurting for cash, but a job and a free prosthetic on top of it? That kind of deal didn't come around twice.

The kid lived on private land in the Shikura suburbs. ...Super rich family, huh? I agreed to drop by tomorrow and started to rise from my seat.

"Thank you. As your predecessor, allow me one piece of advice." He smiled, clasping his hands as if in prayer. "...That child *adores* humans. However rude or ill-spirited you may be, they'll never object. But listen carefully. There's one phrase you must *never* utter, regardless of how close you become."

As the once amiable man's lips twisted unnaturally, a chill crawled up my spine.

"Never, ever ask them to go outside. Speak those words, and you'll have made yourself their sworn enemy."

And with that, a low, devilish snicker rolled out of him.

▪

Shikura City was a city of extremes. The station district looked like any other urban centre, but the high-rises were actually clustered tightly together. Beyond them lay nothing but forests and farmland stretching endlessly. Walk two kilometres from the station toward the residential district, and you'd hit nothing but countryside.

And somewhere in those bleak outskirts, hidden in one of the scattered woodlands, lived the kid with the prosthetic arm.

The city bus dropped me near the area. What should've been private property sprawled before me—an unnaturally vast forest. Street lamps stood like sentinels along the path, leading me to my destination.

A building shaped like a giant die. A perfect ten-metre cube sat in an artificial clearing, the surrounding trees brutally cleared to make space. Yamada—definitely a fake name—had called it a water reservoir, supposedly filled to the brim.

The iron door wasn't locked.

Inside, darkness. Sunlight barely grazed the stairwell plunging underground. Pretty damn deep.

"Jesus. Ward D's got nothing on this place."

I wasn't exactly slow on the uptake. Every nerve in me screamed that this was a predator's den. Fear of the unknown, or death, was something hardwired into every human being.

"...But I already agreed to meet the guy."

Backing out wasn't Ishizue Arika's style. Once he gave his word, he'd keep it. Even if it meant walking headlong into trouble.

The stairs descended. The door shut behind me. By itself! I moved through the pitch-black corridor until another door loomed in my way. Groping blindly, I found the knob and turned it. The ancient door creaked open. And then—

"...Ah."

I looked up at the sky. For the first time in my life, I understood what people meant by fate. ...What the hell? Since when had I turned into some lovestruck schoolgirl? Damn. Guess I owed the Doc an apology.

The room looked like it had been stolen from some medieval castle—some dim, forgotten chamber scooped up with a spoon.

Chessboard tiles of black and white. Brick walls. Antique furniture. A haphazard pile of junk in one corner. No crude electric lights here—just a ceiling made entirely of glass. A water tank, actually. Sunlight streamed through in liquid ripples, bathing the underground chamber in light.

"Hello. Are you Ishizue Arika?"

The voice emanated from the canopy bed at the centre of the room.

A shiver, persistent and cold, traced its way down my spine, momentarily stealing even my own name. But I clenched my gut, forcing myself forward. I *had* to see. I absolutely *needed* to see the owner of that impossibly beautiful voice.

"Ah, could you stop there? Oh, wow. You really *do* only have one arm. Just like I heard."

I halted a metre short of the bed.

Beyond the hanging veil, a figure lay nestled in the sheets.

"Wha—wh-wh-what the hell?!"

Sh-sh-sh-she's insanely cute! What is this?! How is it even legal for a human to look like that?!

I'd crossed paths with my fair share of knockouts before, but this was beyond words. Were fairy tale characters just... *real* now?

"Hello? You *are* Ishizue Arika, right?"

A long-haired girl peered at me, a flicker of unease in her eyes.

...I was about to short-circuit. Settled into the plush bed was a girl who couldn't have been a day over fourteen. Eyes pale to the point of translucence. Hair so black it seemed to drink in the light. Her nightgown, a luxurious garment utterly unsuitable for us commoners to wear, called to mind a high-end doll. Her tiny frame only intensified this quality.

"...No way."

Then, my frantic thoughts slammed to a halt. It wasn't just that she was small. She *lacked.*

Missing.

It was *completely* missing.

This doll had no arms. No legs, either.

Finally, I understood what 'caretaker' truly implied. No wonder Yamada said she couldn't lift a finger. No way she could hurt anyone.

Perfect. I was already on my knees.

Who in their right mind would ever want to take this creature outside? The girl—this room—was already complete. A limbless girl. A forest no soul ever wandered. An underwater basement. A flawlessly enclosed world. *Ah, how meaningless. How sublime. I should've done this too!*

"Ishizue? Ah, of course. Your prosthetic. Could you wait a second? ...Huh, seems it's in a bad mood all of a sudden. It was *just* on the desk."

The girl could barely lift her head on her own.

I scanned the alluring room.

Under the sofa, a Doberman-like black dog lay curled up, wholly indifferent to my presence.

Suddenly, the room darkened. I glanced upward. A shark-like fish glided across the tank overhead, casting a moving shadow.

Where the hell was I even supposed to begin questioning any of this? That ceiling was glass. And the water had to be at least ten metres deep. ...Sure, it was crystal clear, but could fish even *survive* in that? Wait, what the hell was a shark even *doing* here?!

"...Dear, me. I do apologise for wasting your time, but it looks like the prosthetic you need is asleep. I guess our deal's off."

The black-haired girl lowered her eyes, a hint of disappointment in her countenance. *Hold on, hold on. That's a little too much stimulation.* Any sane man would wrap her in a hug on the spot. Or strangle her.

"Nah, I'll take the job. All I've gotta do is look after you, right?"

"Hm? You haven't even heard the particulars yet."

"Doesn't matter. I'm in. Sounds like easy work, after all."

Truthfully, I was still scared. The dog, the shark—this room wasn't normal. But her beauty? It demanded this fear as the toll for its existence.

"Oh. Thank you, Ishizue. I'm Karyou Kaie, by the way. Though I suspect you've heard as much. I look forward to us gentlemen getting along."

"....."

Lightning struck me for the third time today.

The girl beamed at me—utterly trusting, utterly radiant. What a shame we couldn't seal it with a handshake.

But wait. What did she just say?

◇

"Wait—you're a guy?!"

Betrayal! Absolute betrayal! Okay, sure, his chest was flat for fourteen, but down there? Fully equipped. The little bastard had played me perfectly.

"Ahahaha... You only took this job because you had certain *expectations,* didn't you, Ishizue?"

The black-haired devil laughed with angelic innocence.

And goddammit, that face was still devastating. Even as I helped him change, my heart was thundering like some hormonal teenager.

It was my second day as his caretaker. Then, completely out of the blue…

"I'm sweaty. Ishizue, help me change."

When those words left his mouth, I thought I was done for!

"…The hell is this? A qipao? You sleep in something this fancy?"

I shot a glare at the delicate silk garment. This was ridiculous.

"It merely takes inspiration from one. This is just a simple nightgown. The silk's for comfort's sake. Incidentally, I never wear the same garment twice."

You've gotta be kidding me. Kaie stayed perfectly unruffled as I maneuvered his limbless body like a doll. …*Shit.* My face burned despite myself. The act of undressing him was nothing short of psychological torture. I was peeling clothes from a beautiful, defenceless 'girl' who couldn't fight back, who merely bore the humiliation in silence, enduring as an outsider like me invaded her privacy. My fingers shook on the buttons. It felt profane, like defiling a priceless doll.

His body, so pale and delicate, sent a wave of self-disgust crawling through me. For a terrifying instant, I considered giving in to the madness—just becoming a criminal on the spot—before my gaze fell. On that *thing* between his legs. If only someone could understand that moment… But no. No one ever would.

"All right, done. Any complaints? Nothing bunched up in the back?"

"No, you were quite thorough. You're unexpectedly considerate, Ishizue. And surprisingly deft for someone with only one arm."

"Yeah, well. When you've only got one, you figure it out."

I retreated from the bed. The sofa had already been claimed by that black dog, so I settled on the floor instead.

Kaie was like a venomous swallowtail, shedding poison without even knowing it. Get too close, and you'd overdose.

Against this sort of thing, you had to slowly build up your tolerance.

▪▪▪

My life had transformed completely.

These days, I spent nearly every waking hour in Kaie's underground chamber, only returning to my apartment to sleep. Sometimes when I couldn't be bothered to make the trip, I'd ask if I could just stay overnight.

"Nights are too dangerous," he'd always refuse. "Besides, wasn't it you who claimed you couldn't stand being down here for even one day, Ishizue? Go and get yourself some good fresh air."

The work itself required less effort than yawning. Feeding him, occasionally helping him walk around with his prosthetics, and making idle conversation to while away the hours. Bathing him was still the trickiest part, but the even more awkward necessity down below...

"Ishizue, hand me that prosthetic leg."

...he handled himself, shuffling off to the bathroom without assistance.

The days slipped by effortlessly, without friction or resistance. Before I realised it, an entire month had disappeared. When my first paycheck landed, guilt started gnawing at me. I was getting paid for *this?* Work was supposed to be grueling. Something this effortless just left me waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I could feel the balance crumbling under my feet.

Even returning to my apartment, what used to be my refuge, left me feeling empty. My cramped but once-cherished home now seemed utterly insignificant. If solitude were what I'd been seeking, that underground room would have been perfection incarnate. Having tasted it once, my apartment had been reduced to a glorified changing room. Like a peasant who'd wandered into a royal ball only to find their former life dull and colourless by comparison.

I flicked on the television, let the meaningless news chatter fill the overbearing silence, and lay in bed mentally replaying the day's events in that sunken room.

"You really don't live up to your name, huh, Ishizue?"

The jab had gotten under my skin. Who the hell did this brat think he was? Sometimes, I genuinely couldn't stand his guts. Here I was, going out of my way to accommodate him, while he remained completely indifferent to my existence.

"I expected you to be crueler, honestly."

"Huh?"

"You're kind. You make special considerations for me. And despite this warped body of mine, you still treat me like a human being."

He actually *enjoyed* being treated coldly. Little masochist.

But that indifference represented a strength I'd never possessed. Kaie remained utterly unbothered whether people saw him as an object or monster—he existed beyond such concerns. Why was I so drawn to something I could never become? ...*Whatever*. I probably just wanted to soak in the spillover of his immunity. Nothing more to it than that.

"...Christ. This is like walking a tightrope. I'll have to take measures for when I lose my footing."

But panicking would only guarantee the fall. Slow, deliberate corrections. I wanted to keep being his caretaker. That sunken room occupied my thoughts constantly.

But this was just intoxication. A passing fever. Give it a month, and the delirium would burn itself out.

◇

Turns out my optimism was completely misplaced. My cold only got worse, the fever spiking higher instead of breaking. Pathetic? Sure, but that's life for you. When fortune forsakes you, it doesn't hold back.

◇

"Come to think of it," Kaie said abruptly, "your apartment's up in north Shikura, right?"

"Yeah. Why? Need me to fetch something?"

"Maybe. If it's up for grabs. You haven't heard the news? The world of rock and roll's finally come to our sleepy little town!"

He threw a one-armed salute. Must've been in better spirits today—he was actually wearing prosthetics on his left arm and both legs. Something about those artificial limbs seemed to have him unusually revved up.

"Rock and roll? The hell's that, some sort of fossil exhibit?"

I closed my manga volume. Back when I'd griped about being bored, Kaie had started footing the bill for my books under the guise of work expenses. Since he never read them, they'd effectively become my personal library. Not that he needed to know I'd already set my sights on the complete Romance of the Three Kingdoms next.

"Fossil? Are you kidding me? That's the last thing I'd expect to hear from someone who looks *just* like a rock and roller. Don't tell me you don't listen to music at all?"

"Not really, no. I could probably make some, but listening to other people's stuff never appealed to me."

"Huh. No wonder why you didn't get me. Anyway, here's the scoop. Turns out the kids up north have tapped into a new pipeline for pharmaceuticals you won't see on any pharmacy shelf. And they're not selling them for cheap."

"Wait, what?"

That came completely out of left field. Not that it was any of my business, but Kaie's underground lair clearly had eyes and ears everywhere.

"Not as glamorous as it sounds, though. Just some bottom-shelf pushers working overtime while a bunch of teenagers get themselves excited. And they're not just selling—they've gotten awfully good at making examples out of anyone who falls behind on payments. Word is they'll even run over kids who rack up too much debt. Apparently, intentional hit-and-runs are harder to trace than accidents. Or so my detective friend says."

"....."

This had nothing to do with me, but what kind of manga-esque nonsense was this?

"...Wait, hold on. Even *I* know that going public with that kinda operation is a death wish. If you're just looking to dream, Halcion's more than enough. Anything stronger, you keep it quiet, limited to a tight circle. You start letting it leak, and you're practically begging to get busted."

"Exactly. And yet they *haven't* been caught—that's the problem. The dealers keep a low profile, of course, but here's the thing: they're copying everything from past cases. They're modeling their entire operation after small-time rings that managed to fly under the radar longer. Because of that, the police can't even get a read on the mastermind."

"....."

Now, *that* was genuinely odd. A copycat, by definition, should possess recognizable traits. But this one merely mimicked others—no distinct face, no true identity. Just a cipher patched in the borrowed patterns of other people's crimes.

"Strange MO. You think there's some endgame behind all this copying?"

"Who knows? They're certainly not aiming to be the genuine article, though. Anyway, with all that going on, I figured you might've heard something. You strike me as the type who'd stumble into that mess without even trying."

"Not a chance. You honestly think a pack of two-bit dealers would come sniffing anywhere near my place?"

"Oh."

Kaie nodded, suddenly understanding.

Damn right. I lived in Complex 13—the kind of place that could silence even crying babies. It was notorious for being *both* dangerous and dirt-poor. Still, I had to admit, this exchange was... weirdly heartwarming.

"You're smiling. So you *do* know something?"

"Nah, nothing like that. But that whole spiel just now—you were just looking out for me, weren't you? A little warning to stay out of trouble?"

Kaie didn't so much as blink.

"Why would I be? I'm only interested in the copycat. What happens to you couldn't matter less to me."

The black dog let out a single, sharp bark.

▪▪▪

Life had settled into a comfortable rhythm.

Five months out of that godforsaken hospital, and things were finally looking up. As I walked back to my apartment that evening, I caught myself thinking this year might actually end on a decent note. Even Kaie's usual indifference in the basement didn't get under my skin anymore. Time was on my side, after all. And if the little punk ever pushed his luck, I could always knock some sense into him.

"Ah. Welcome back, Arika dear."

Niijima's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. He was posted up by my door, which immediately set off every alarm bell in my head. My long-dormant radar instantly kicked back into high gear.

"...Something happen?"

"Well, it seems someone was in your apartment earlier. You're never back before seven, so when I heard noises, I figured I'd keep an eye on things. This strange young man came out saying he knew you from before your hospitalization. Told me not to worry and just... left."

"You're kidding me. That's it? Nothing else?"

"Nothing at all. But this is the first time anyone's ever come looking for you."

No shit. I hadn't told a soul from my past about my discharge.

After thanking Niijima, I stepped inside.

"Goddamn it. I don't have the slightest damn clue who it could've been."

The room had been thoroughly ransacked, but at least the bed and TV were untouched. I collapsed onto the mattress, racking my brain for leads. Of course,

nothing came to mind. Only one useful thought surfaced through the frustration: first thing tomorrow, I was getting those goddamn locks changed.

◇

"Some grudge I don't even remember? Christ, that's all I've been hearing today."

I showed up late the next afternoon at two o'clock, having wasted my morning supervising the door repairs. Juice alone wasn't enough to keep Kaie nourished, so I'd taken to slicing apples for him while snacking on grapes myself. The one-handed fruit cutting was a skill I'd developed specifically for his sake.

"Listen, I'm serious here. When I got home yesterday, someone had turned my place upside down. Since my discharge, I haven't done a single thing that'd make anyone want payback."

I was genuinely at a loss as I explained the situation.

Kaie dutifully opened his mouth with an "Ah," waiting to be fed, and I placed a slice of apple on his tongue. His left prosthetic arm sat unused on the table—apparently, he couldn't be bothered to wear it today.

"Are you sure it wasn't just a regular burglary?"

"Well, nothing was taken. And I make it a policy to always carry my passbook with me."

Truth was, I carried all my valuables on my person. If someone ever got their hands on that passbook, the life I'd painstakingly patched together would collapse overnight.

"Hmm. I don't think worrying about it is going to get you anywhere, though. Besides, it's not like you even remember anything from the daytime. No way for you to know what you might have done yesterday."

"Well, yeah… but—"

Wait a second. Had I ever actually told Kaie about my memory lapses?

"All done! Thanks. You can clear this away now."

I picked up the tray and headed for the sink.

Without a proper kitchen, all the washing-up had to be done in the cramped bathroom alcove. The water came from storage tanks since there was no plumbing. If the above-ground reservoir was a cube, then this underground room was its perfect mirror. Four walls, four doors, though only the southern entrance saw any use. The sink sat right beside it. The other doors were, quite literally, never opened.

"…What the hell? Why are there two cups here?"

The answer hit immediately. Someone else had been here before me.

"Hey. You had company earlier?"

I kept my voice carefully casual as I washed the fruit knife and plate.

"Hmmm? I thought *you* sent him. Some guy with 'problems' who insisted on talking to me."

I shut off the tap, slipped the fruit knife into my pocket, flicked the water off my hands, and strolled back into the main room as casually as I could manage.

"What'd he look like? Because I'm coming up blank here."

"A little younger than you. Said his name was Hisaori Shinya."

"Hisaori… Shinya?"

"You know him?"

Know him? Of *fucking* course I knew him.

But why would he be *here*?

Had they discharged him already?

"Typical of him to show up unannounced. So, what did he want?"

"That's the disturbing part. He wants revenge on his sister. You're familiar with the case, right?"

"I know the broad strokes."

Hisaori Shinya—the high schooler who murdered his parents and attempted to kill his own sister. But that was three years ago. He should still be hospitalized. Even if they had discharged him, you'd think he'd have reformed, not come back for a second attempt.

"So. What'd you tell him?"

"I couldn't get through to him at all. Have you ever heard that rumour? To kill a Possessed, ask the devil in the woods. Meaning this place, of course. The trouble is, Shinya seemed to take that at face value."

Above us, the fish drifted languidly across the ceiling.

The black dog on the sofa let out a soft snort.

First I'd heard of that particular rumour. But for this particular little bastard? It fit him to a tee.

"Right. Shinya's sister is Possessed, so he must have come looking for a rematch. What advice did you give him?"

"I just told him not to get himself killed instead. Can't exactly lend prosthetics to someone with all their limbs intact. When he kept hounding me about how he should go about his revenge, I told him killing her was his only real option."

Woof. Woof.

The dog that had ignored me for months suddenly came over and rubbed against my leg.

"...Goddamn nuisance. When did he leave?"

"About an hour before you arrived."

Call it the courtesy of an old friend. I couldn't let a loose cannon like that run around unsupervised.

"Sorry, but I'm cutting my shift short today. Gotta track Shinya down."

Not that I liked my odds in a fight with only one arm.

"Ah, wait. Take the prosthetic on the table. You don't possess emotions of your own yet, so that's about the only one you can move right now."

What the hell was *that* supposed to mean? Was he talking about the left arm just sitting there?

"No need to hesitate. After all, *this* is exactly what brought you here, isn't it?"

"U-Uh... yeah. Guess I'll borrow it. Doubt it'll be much help, though."

Hard to turn him down when he put it like that.

I picked up the pale prosthetic—the one I'd never wanted, the one that would never fit me right—and left the basement behind.

◇

To be perfectly honest, I had a solid lead. If nothing had changed in three years, Hisaori Shinya's family apartment was in the Nouzu housing complex.

I backtracked to the station and caught a bus headed for Nouzu. This would be my first time setting foot in that part of town since my release. The less attention I drew, the better.

On the ride, I fitted the prosthetic I'd borrowed from Kaie. I'd only ever watched him attach it, so I copied the motions to the best of my ability. I'd been trying not to dwell on it, but I knew damn well this prosthetic was a genuine marvel, utterly devoid of any tricks or mechanisms.

The pallid limb fused seamlessly with my stump the moment it brushed against my skin—like a plaster cast, only far more unsettling. Of course, it didn't move a single inch. The real uncanniness was how, when on Kaie, the thing moved like it had a will of its own.

"...Seriously. How the hell does this thing even work?"

I grumbled under my breath as the bus rattled along.

Before long, we reached Nouzu. The sun had begun to dip, staining the so-called Delusion Complex—one of Shikura City's three great urban legends—a deep, bloody red.

Shinya's old apartment was Unit 303, Building 3.

The nameplate was blank. No new tenants, it seemed. Not surprising. Once a place birthed a Possessed, no one in their right mind would consider moving in.

I jimmied the lock and slipped inside. No sense giving him a chance to flee by ringing the doorbell. But the place was completely barren. The Nouzu apartments were 3LDK units—cramped by most standards, but probably just right for a family of four.

The last embers of daylight were dying out. I stared out at the balcony from the hollowed-out remains of what had once been a living room.

...Well, then.

If he wasn't here, I had no other leads. Much as I hated the thought, the moment I got back, I'd have to call the hospital and ask where they'd discharged him.

×××

The timing was impeccable—almost suspiciously precise.

Just past nine in the evening, as I returned from Nouzu to the area near Shikura Station, standing in front of my dilapidated Complex 13 apartment, something hard and unyielding smashed into the base of my skull.

White-hot sparks exploded behind my eyelids.

Consciousness clung stubbornly—I didn't black out—but my body lurched forward uncontrollably, only to meet the brutal impact of a boot between my shoulder blades that sent me sprawling across the pavement.

"Oi. Yer Ishizue Arika, aren't ya?"

Chapped hands grabbed hold of my hair, yanking my dazed body into the shadows between buildings. The absurdity struck me even through the pain—we were literally in front of residential buildings. Was nobody really coming to help?

"The hell's this? Sure this is the guy?! He looks weaker than *us*! This is the dipshit we've been hunting?"

Another explosion of pain—this time from a well-aimed kick to my temple. I couldn't keep up at all. Three… no, maybe five of those brats surrounded me in the dim light, all wielding crude pieces of wood.

"Umm, you good? You can still keep goin', right? Not that I give a shit anyway. Hey Tarou, mind if I take another swing?"

"Sure, knock yourself out. I don't see any blood yet, anyway. Just don't go smashin' his face. Bash 'em too hard, and you might actually get 'em killed."

Their laughter curdled in the night air.

Then—*crack*. Someone had taken a full golf swing at my head.

"You fucking idiot! The back of the skull's just as bad as the face! Oh shit, is that blood? I told you to stop! You'll fucking kill 'em!"

"Eh? Dude, no one's gonna give a shit anyway. Freaks like these are better off dead anyway."

"Oh right! Nobody gives a shit if Possessed drop dead in the streets. They're just walking sacks of disease, after all!"

Just like that, they lost any semblance of restraint—kicks and blows raining down onto a conscious punching bag. Insults mixed with the sickening impacts. Each new strike sent fireworks of pain bursting behind my eyes, their faces and voices blurring into a meaningless smear of sound and motion. Only one thought remained crystalline in the chaos. They'd thrown the first punch.

"...Haa."

The prosthetic left arm twitched. The lifeless limb suddenly pulsed with blood flow—*squelch.*

"Uh... Tarou? What's wrong with your hand?"

The screaming started shortly after that. The irony wasn't lost on me—here we were, practically on someone's doorstep, yet not a single door opened.

First came their shock—the indignant rage of bullies discovering their victim could bite back. Then came the violence of numbers. And finally—the absolute, overwhelming reversal. Trampling. Humiliation. Shrieking pleas.

"P-P-Please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'M SORRY!"

The last one, a girl about my age, sobbed into the pavement as she begged. I couldn't help but laugh.

I'll be honest—violence has always sickened me. But this? Watching bullies taste true fear? That feels real *damn* good.

◆

"Hahaha...hahaha...hahahahaha!"

The laughter came in uncontrollable bursts, each one harder to suppress than the last.

Around me, five—maybe six—teenage boys lay in various states of collapse. Bloodied, battered, but still breathing. For the most part.

"Crap. Well… at least they're alive, right?"

Hahaha. A flicker of regret. What the hell was wrong with me? After finally getting discharged, after all my efforts to start fresh as a functioning human being, I'd gone and overstepped 'self-defence' against complete strangers. *Hahaha.* This could very well be my one-way ticket straight back to the ward. But I couldn't help it. Nothing could stop this bubbling euphoria.

Then again—maybe the doctors who cleared someone in my mental state for discharge should share the blame. *Let's call it fifty-fifty.*

"Hey there, Ta. Need an ambulance? A simple yes or no would help. Might wanna speak up. No amount of wheezing's gonna get the point across, y'know?"

Left like this, one or two of them might not make it until morning. But eh. Someone would stumble across them eventually. The same moronic bravado that drove them to jump me in broad daylight would probably end up saving their skins now.

"Lucky break. If any of you had actually kicked the bucket, I'd be dismembering you and digging your graves right now. We all got off easy, didn't we?"

Hahaha…hahaha. Shit. I was far too euphoric to rein in my expressions. No point lingering. Time to disappear.

×××

"Right, I'm home."

Aside from that minor detour into carnage, I'd made it back from Nouzu without further incident.

I peeled off my dirt-stained jacket, flicked on the TV, and collapsed onto my bed—only to immediately sit bolt upright at the news report.

"What the—?"

No possible misunderstanding. The anchor, who usually reported on a world far removed from mine, was repeating a name I knew entirely too well.

"The young man found deceased in Shikura City's Nouzu industrial district at approximately 6 PM has been identified as 19-year-old local Hisaori Shinya. Authorities, citing eyewitness testimony and Shinya's background, are seeking ××××××× ××××××, who was reportedly present at the scene, for questioning regarding—"

"That's... impossible."

For a moment, everything turned white, my consciousness teetering on the edge. Somehow, I managed to stay upright just long enough to hear the most absurd part...

"Why the hell... am I being named as a murder suspect?"

...as my *own* name was formally announced in connection with Hisaori Shinya's death.

2. HandS.(L)

▪▪▪

No matter what I did, nothing ever seemed to work out.

Though my academic record remained spotless, and my standing as an honour student was praised without exception, those around me remained consumed by a quiet dread, wishing for my very disappearance. I understood why: my sense of when to stop, when to desist, was fundamentally estranged from that of other children.

From everyday errands to simple exchanges with my parents, from school events to managing my own body, I could not cease until I had achieved what I perceived as the absolute pinnacle of results. Each relentless pursuit brought weariness to my parents, but because the outcomes were invariably superior, I was praised nonetheless.

My attempts at recovery, predictably, succeeded... and failed.

My methods, while undeniably effective, also invariably wounded many. No one ever held me accountable, simply because the sum of positives outweighed the negatives. But I knew that one day, that delicate balance would inevitably invert, for I knew no other way to live.

Father had once rebuked me, commanding me to do nothing at all. I was, at my core, irrevocably broken. Mother had once confessed that I was an eyesore. I, alone, was incapable of repairing myself.

There was no escape, no solace, and falling into despair became my natural state; eventually, even stepping outside became impossible. The mere act of holding a spoon now filled me with terror.

But then, one day, Mother offered a revelation. If I feared my own actions, she explained, then salvation could be found in faithfully imitating, to the letter, the actions of someone else.

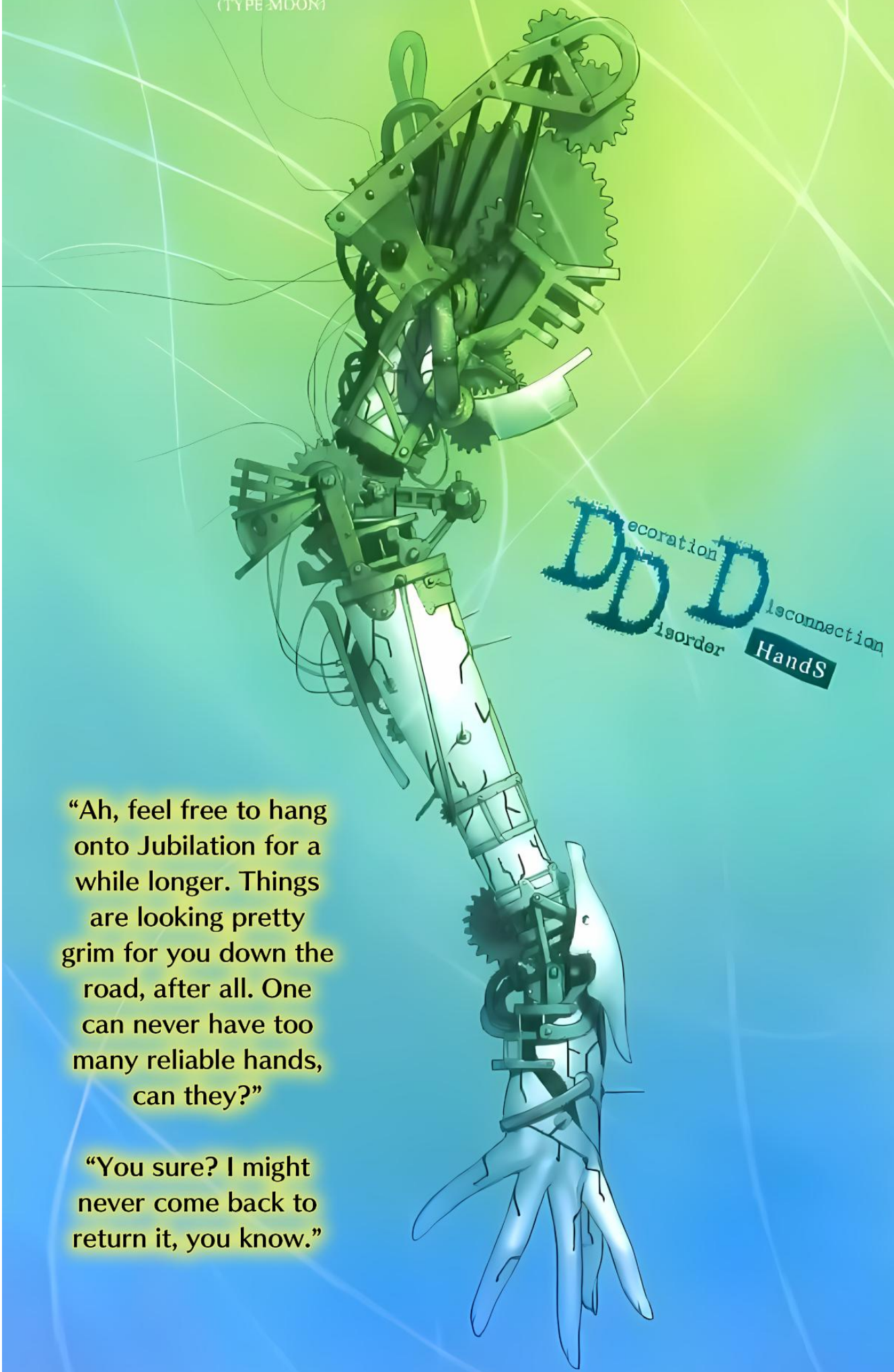
◇

And thus, my fate was sealed.

For I possessed no means to stop myself.

HandS.(L)

Written by Kinoko Nasu
Illustrated by Koyama Hirokazu
(TYPE-MOON)



"Ah, feel free to hang onto Jubilation for a while longer. Things are looking pretty grim for you down the road, after all. One can never have too many reliable hands, can they?"

"You sure? I might never come back to return it, you know."

0 / Hand (L)

"Congratulations, Ishizue Arika. Your test results confirm a negative diagnosis. This concludes your treatment as an Agonist Disorder patient. You've endured well these past six months."

July 2003 marked half a year since my confinement commenced. I'd passed every test—EKG, pulse, bloodwork, even brain scans and nerve conduction studies—all squarely within acceptable limits. My acquittal was official. Only Ms. Mato's glare through the observation window suggested any lingering doubts.

"Thanks. So, does this mean I'm finally free?"

"Not quite. You're still showing trauma consistent with exposure to infectious cases, so we'll be redirecting treatment toward that. In the meantime, you'll remain under our care, though we'll transfer you to a standard room."

Turns out, even after being cleared as not Possessed, they weren't kicking me out just yet. The Tomato Tyrant nodded with a self-satisfied hum. I'd put up a decent fight, but in the end, she'd gotten the last word.

Figures. She isn't done making my life hell just yet.

"Dr. Touma will walk you through the particulars, but this will be your new regimen. Admittedly, your case is an unprecedented one. We'd prefer you dedicate yourself a little longer to recovery."

Ward A's staff had more than their share of reasonable doctors. This one, a soft-spoken guy who seemed to actually give a damn, fumbled with a document that looked suspiciously like a contract.

"Right, so I just sign here—"

I scanned the schedule with my pen hovering.

Half my days would be spent trudging through Ward A's endless examinations—fine. But the rest? Forced socialization with other patients. Mandatory fitness routines. And, as if today's psych evaluation hadn't been torture enough, an advanced encore courtesy of Dr. Touma!

"Hold on. What's this 'duty of service to the hospital' clause here supposed to mean?"

Since when were patients the ones doling out services?

"W-Well, Arika, you don't have any glaring health issues aside from your memory, yes? This whole thing is framed as rehabilitation—easing you toward eventual reintegration. We believe this method to be salutary, so to speak."

...*Hah.* So now moonlighting as a nursemaid for other patients qualified as therapy? Guess it did. While I wouldn't be reaping anything from this, it was probably a godsend for them. Either way, if I wasn't risking my neck, what was the damn point?

"Suppose I refuse?"

"That's... not really an option. Dr. Touma was rather adamant that this was non-negotiable."

How pitiful. He can't even look me in the eye.

Fun fact: In this glorified prison, most deaths didn't come from botched surgeries. They often came about from patients killing each other after failed attempts at small talk.

"Got it. But just so we're crystal clear, 'service' means volunteer work, right?"

"In the broadest sense, yes. Though the word can just as easily connote blind fealty. Or martyrdom."

Fantastic. Looked like I wasn't getting out of here anytime soon.

Survival meant weathering Ms. Mato's special brand of torment. And death could come as early as tomorrow. Fifty-fifty odds, then. In other words, it'd do me no good to get my hopes up.

I stepped out of the exam room—only to find Ms. Mato leaning against the wall. No white coat. Must've been off-duty.

"Shozai. Let me make this as clear as possible for you. This isn't volunteer work."

"...Yeah, yeah. I heard. It's compulsory. Loud and clear."

"Good. Do your job properly, and you'll be treated like a person for once. Not that you need motivation. You've got a talent for stumbling onto landmines all on

your own. See you next week," the Tomato Tyrant lobbed over her shoulder as she walked off. Beware—despair arrives next week, I mentally noted.

Still, my new privileges granted me limited freedom to roam the ward. My first stop: the so-called confessional—Dr. Roman's (officially Dr. Kinui's) office. The one doctor here truly on the patients' side.

"Hopeless? Quite the opposite. If anything, your prospects look rather bright, Arika. You have a Ward D patient for a sister, remember? Even with your negative result, the hospital can't just declare your treatment complete so hastily. In spite of that, it only took you six months to be cleared. That speaks volumes about Dr. Touma's efforts."

"Right. Her exact words: 'Lucky for us, he'll forget by sundown even if we work him to death.'"

No wonder she'd been so enthusiastic. Presiding Officer Touma Mato—Ms. Mato to her victims—was the one who'd bagged my sister when she'd turned Possessed, before she could turn Shikura City into a bloodbath.

Later, I'd learned she lived a double life as both a medical examiner and a Public Security Bureau elite, shipped in to monitor Agonist Disorder cases. A real go-getter. When she wasn't poking at patients here, she was out rounding up fresh ones.

"Ah, right. You can't carry daytime memories into the evening, can you? Could you be more specific about the timeframe of the memories you lose?"

"Mornings depend on how I'm feeling. But on average? Everything from 9 AM to 6 PM gets wiped clean. And sunset's an absolute cutoff—doesn't matter what time it happens."

On the flip side, I could hold onto memories from evening until morning just fine. Once I got the hang of it, it didn't really bother me in my everyday life. I just had to jot down anything important that happened during the day and cram the notes into my head at night. The catch was, since it was all text-based input, any information that relied on visuals ended up with subtle errors. Little gaps in the footage, so to speak.

"What an inconvenient condition. Your symptoms show no sign of change, and yet it doesn't seem to be causing you any problems. I can see why Dr. Touma wasn't

exactly on board with letting you go. I suspect she wanted to resolve your memory issues beforehand."

"No way in hell. I'm pretty sure she's just finally gotten sick of torturing me."

"Now *that's* impossible. Arika, do you honestly believe she would ever tire of such a thing?" he lectured with a gentle smile… forcing me to confront an unpleasant truth.

"Right. My bad, that was stupid of me. Anyway, Doc. Starting tomorrow, I've got some free time. Got anything fun lined up for me?"

"Reading… probably wouldn't suit you. You'd just forget it if you did it during the day, after all. Best save that for the evenings."

"Huh. In a way, that's almost ridiculously blissful."

"Then what about painting? Canvases don't forget, after all. You wouldn't have much trouble picking up where you left off."

"Well, yeah, but is painting *actually* fun?"

"Depending on how seriously you take it, it might cause you some anguish. Still, didn't you ever doodle as a child, Arika?"

The doctor dragged out a dust-caked set of art supplies.

…*Well.* I did have some hazy recollection of scribbling nonsense as a kid. It wasn't for anyone's praise or for anyone else to see. I was just playing around with a pen for the hell of it. But maybe that was the trick. No purpose from the start, so no bitter feelings to deal with.

I claimed Ward B's waiting area as my makeshift studio—the hospital's only decent space with courtyard access. So there I was, haphazardly slapping paint around, when an odd presence materialized beside me.

"Hey, mind if I sit next to you?"

"Huh?"

The guy—Hisaori Shinya, he introduced—simply folded himself onto the floor, observing me with the wide-eyed curiosity of a small animal encountering a human for the very first time. His eyes were crystalline, riveted to my every motion, every brushstroke, with unfiltered fascination.

He oozed malice but didn't seem to mean any actual harm, so against my better judgement, I humoured him into a conversation. Ms. Mato was right; I guess I was the type to just cheerfully step on landmines.

"So how come you're that good with just one?"

"Well, when you've only got one, you figure it out."

I chuckled, and Hisaori echoed it, just as amused. He was a fairly nondescript guy, and we fell into easy conversation about the most trivial of topics, eventually falling into some sort of friendship.

The only thing that truly stuck with me, though, was his peculiar interest in my single arm. I'd lost my left, leaving only my right. And the way he studied that remaining arm probably meant...

◇

"Hey, Ishizue. Playing shogi today?"

"Hm?"

It was early 2004—six months after I'd gotten tangled in some pointless hospital drama that pushed my discharge back to summer. That's when I found myself staring down an unfamiliar patient.

"You okay? It's me, Hisaori."

Hisaori? Now that he mentioned it, the figure before me lined up with the description in my notes about Hisaori Shinya.

Since I only ever saw Hisaori when the sun was still up, I couldn't actually picture him. My recognition depended entirely on written physical descriptors: hair length, build, and gender. The reason I hesitated was simple—this Hisaori had developed one glaring new characteristic.

"So, what's the deal? Get yourself into an accident?"

"Oh, this? Just the aftermath of surgery. They removed a part that's been giving me trouble for a while."

Much like I was missing my left arm, Hisaori now lacked his right.

After some conversation, the chime signaling the end of the free period played.

Hisaori waved goodbye and left.

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"Well hello there, Arika."

Just then, Dr. Roman conveniently passed by. He was the kind of doctor who'd always answer your questions.

"Hey Doc. Is Hisaori getting discharged soon?"

"That's right. Like you, they participated diligently in the volunteer work, so their discharge was moved up by six months. We needed to let someone go this month anyway. If only you'd behaved yourself, it might have been you."

"Hah. Bet Ms. Mato was fuming. Figures. Looks like I'm heading back to solitary tomorrow because of it. Oh, and by the way, what're Hisaori's symptoms like anyway? I know he's a Ward C patient, but he didn't strike me as off at all."

"Hisaori's mutation is a rare case. It's a condition where outward changes manifest yet remain imperceptible to others. Care to hazard a guess?"

I threw my hand up in surrender. Riddles about seeing something but not understanding it were a pain in the ass. And truth be told, I didn't particularly care about Hisaori's diagnosis.

"Facial expressions. Hisaori's facial nerve pathways and musculature have transformed into something entirely novel. They're now capable of voluntarily reproducing any expression he envisions."

"Huh? Can't everyone do that? Anyone would have a grim look on their face if they were pissed off, no?"

"Let's put it this way. You can't smile when you're angry, can you? What makes Hisaori special is that they can put on a sad face even when they're angry. While their face's anatomical structure remains unchanged, Hisaori can flawlessly replicate the full spectrum of human expressions and gestures. They could, for example, mimic your characteristic lifeless demeanor with absolute accuracy."

"...Huh. It's a subtle mutation. Guess that means there's no need for treatment, though. He's harmless enough to be allowed outside the hospital."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. Perhaps it may not serve much of a purpose biologically, but consider it from the lens of society. It would be quite the talent, albeit an analog one."

So, a fake smile that looked as genuine as any other was terrifying. I wondered if the Doc had been burned by some gold digger before.

"Anyway, mutation aside, how'd he end up Possessed in the first place?"

This was my real interest. No matter how ordinary Hisaori came off, being here meant he must've snapped at some point.

"...An abnormal degree of dependency, shall we say? They're unable to formulate any coherent purpose in life. Or rather, their excessive self-objectification has stripped them of the ability to perceive themselves objectively. They cannot even walk without modeling their actions after someone else."

"Hmm... Are you sure this is the place for him? A mental institution sounds like a better fit than this lockup."

"Not quite, actually. While there are certainly complications, she isn't literally becoming whoever she's imitating. Hisaori Makina merely borrows other people's lifestyles as a template. It's the only way for things to go well for her. You see, Arika, the psychiatric patient in the family is actually her younger brother, Hisaori Shinya..."

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◇

Early 2004 marked three years since Hisaori Shinya's court-ordered psychiatric confinement. After completing two and a half years of treatment followed by time in a juvenile reformatory, the nineteen-year-old was finally cleared for societal reintegration—albeit under supervised probation. His relatives had agreed to take him in.

As a tangential note: His elder sister, Hisaori Makina, was discharged from Origa Memorial Hospital around the same time. With no family willing to claim her, she entered a Shikura City-operated welfare facility.

By all official accounts, Shinya had been a model patient. Physicians and probation officers alike testified to his complete mental and physical recovery—an outcome all the more striking in light of the psychotic collapse that got him there in the first place.

Yet even after regaining his faculties, his testimony about that night remained inconsistent. Initially, he'd claimed Makina was the aggressor and he the victim. Mere days later, however, when Makina was diagnosed with Agonist Disorder, his narrative shifted abruptly.

From that point forward, he shouldered full responsibility for the incident and never spoke of his sister again. After two years of exhaustive investigations and court proceedings, the tragedy of the Hisaori family was ultimately classified as accidental rather than premeditated.

Six months after his release, workers discovered Shinya's body in a unit at the Nouzu Industrial Complex—his family's former residence.

The cause of death was blood loss from a laceration on his neck.

For three years, since the day he shoved his sister off their third-floor balcony and lost both parents, he had carried his burdens alone. What phantoms haunted him? There's no one left who could say.

No living witness, save perhaps the one who heard his final confession in that basement, scarcely half a day earlier.

▪▪▪

"Let me tell you about my sister… if you'll hear me out."

He spoke with unsettling calm as he began his story.

"Not once have I ever considered her a human being. I understand why now, but as a child… it confused me. She was everything I wanted to be—perfect in every way. So why did she terrify me just as much?"

1

My sister was 'Maki,' to wind. I was 'Shin,' to unwind.

Mother always said my name, Shinya, flowed naturally from hers.

Makina and Shinya. Our parents had envisioned the perfect sibling bond, and God knows I longed for that too. But my sister lacked the capacity for such human sentimentalities.

True brilliance requires the right environment to flourish. Like dumping advanced weaponry on a primitive island, our modest household had no business trying to enshrine a deity. Hisaori Makina wasn't just gifted—she was a natural disaster delivered right upon our doorstep.

"Hey, Shinya, you know how your sister wants to be alone sometimes? Whenever that happens, tell Mom or Dad right away. Before it's… too late to fix things…"

This warning came every time we played together, whispered in my ear. Mother repeated it so often the words etched themselves into my earliest memories. Yet as a child, I could never understand her concern—how could I, when I adored my sister without reservation? I burned with envy and admiration in equal measure at how effortlessly she commanded affection from everyone around us.

If anything, I resented Mother for those furtive glances, those wary looks she cast at my radiant sister. Why scrutinize her like some dangerous specimen? No one would even spare our family a glance if not for her.

"...Oh. You're Makina's little brother."

The shift came after I started elementary school.

In second grade, my homeroom teacher took a single glance at me—just one look at Makina's little brother—and her face twisted in undisguised revulsion. The rejection was instant and absolute. I'd later learn she'd been saddled with Makina the previous year. My sister had been many things, but a conscientious student wasn't one of them. Academics bored her to death.

"What's the point? This is just memorization. Only an idiot would take a game like this seriously."

While Makina was obviously being childish, the teacher proved equally juvenile. Humiliated by having her lessons dismissed as playtime, she lashed out: "Fine! Memorize everything first. Until then, you're banned from my classroom."

Our shared bedroom became Makina's sanctuary for the next few days. We'd held onto our bunk beds until middle school, giving me a perfect vantage point. From her top bunk fortress, she cut off all contact with the outside world, devoting herself entirely to studying as commanded.

True to form, she returned to class within three days, rattling off the entire second-grade syllabus word-for-word. But that was only the opening gambit. Week after week, Makina consumed grade after grade of material, systematically dismantling the teacher's authority until she hit sixth-grade content—halting solely because the elementary school simply had no middle-school texts to offer.

The teacher had made two cardinal missteps: handing Makina a concrete objective and defining the act of studying as rote memorization. Thankfully, our second-grade classmates were too young to grasp the absurdity of her feat. To them, she was just the girl who got them out of lessons for a day. Perhaps it was a stroke of luck. Had they been just a grade higher, they might have compared their intellect to hers and subsequently realized their insignificance.

What followed was a year of exquisite torture for that teacher. Eventually, she called upon our doorstep in desperation, spouting stuff like "Your daughter is… exceptionally gifted. Far too gifted for our modest little school. Allow us to arrange a transfer to a more fitting institution, please…"

They'd provide a recommendation if we applied, sure, but the school would never actively try to sell her to another place. I figured they'd already realized just how strange my sister was. An excellent student was one thing, but foisting a problematic person—a genuine human liability—was a whole other can of worms. So, any transfer request had to come from us, the Hisaori family.

But whenever these situations came up, my father's refrain was always the same: "We can't afford to send her far away. Makina will stay where she is."

And so the lion kept pacing among the society of kittens.

…*Ah.* Given her past with Makina, it was only natural for her to treat me with resentment. Though in bitter irony, she resigned shortly after rumours began circulating about my social ostracization.

I remember how she used to pull up to school in that sharp-looking sedan, every inch the respectable educator. By the end, that same car sat in the parking lot with smashed windows, its ruined shell drawing sneers from students until she stopped coming altogether. When Father mentioned "suicide by hanging" over the morning paper, his discomfort was palpable.

The upperclassmen stated it as a simple fact: "Because Makina had it out for her." I try to stop myself from imagining which of Makina's sycophants planted the idea that enemies ought to be eliminated within her.

It took that tragedy for me to finally grasp what Mother had understood all along. Humans, without a certain depth of understanding, cannot truly appreciate greatness in any given field. A revolutionary internal combustion engine looks no different from an ordinary car to someone who views automobiles as mere transportation. Likewise, for me to correctly perceive Makina for what she was, I would have needed at least a fraction of her intellect.

I can laugh at my own arrogance now, but back then, I took pride in being top of my class—and objectively speaking, I remained academically exceptional

throughout my first year of high school. Even so, I was never afforded the luxury of basking in that superiority. Whether by dumb luck or cruel fate, that particular indulgence was denied to me.

It was like discovering a sleeping monster in the next room before you could even develop an ego. Had I foolishly let arrogance take root, my confidence would undoubtedly have been utterly stripped away. That was the stark reality of my early childhood and the true essence of Hisaori Makina.

No matter what task Makina was given, she always exceeded any expectations the adults set for her. She was lauded as a prodigy, a genius; there wasn't a soul in Nouzu who didn't know her name. However, on closer inspection, she was clearly expending the bare minimum, yet still commanding such staggering, unchallenged dominance that it made ordinary people want to look away. Nothing good would ever come out of staring directly at the sun.

"Sis... you're not even trying, are you?"
"Mhm. I'd end up alone if I did."

Just before bed, I'd spoken to her from my lower bunk, only to be met with that unconcerned response.

How utterly oblivious she was. Makina was completely blind when it came to herself. Her concern felt ironic. After all, she'd been all alone for a long time now, and she was the only one who was yet to realize it.

◇

As Makina advanced through school, my parents' demeanor grew increasingly strained. Even I could see it. Their words praised her, but their eyes regarded her as a burden. Of course they did. Makina was a guarantee of triumph, but only by bleeding everything around her dry. The clearest example was the money. While Makina achieved the top marks in Shikura City, she simultaneously devoured our family's finances.

Once she fixated on learning something, her demand for materials became insatiable. She'd buy books by the dozen, memorize them cover to cover, then inexplicably burn them once finished. Our household budget, as a result, went up in literal flames—like paupers maintaining a luxury car. Their prized child was, at the same time, a money pit forcing them into poverty.

But to outsiders, Makina retained the facade of a perfect student, so neither of our parents could ever reprimand her. They treated her like a dangerous anomaly, all while desperately performing as doting parents for the world to see. It was sickening. The way they groveled before their fifth-grade daughter, and even more revolting, how wholly my sister believed their hollow smiles. She truly was utterly blind when it came to herself.

At school and at home, nothing was beyond her capabilities.

If the school's role was to educate, Mother's to manage the household, and Father's to earn money, then she no longer needed to depend on any one of them. She would have surely managed everything herself.

The only thing holding her back was age. No matter how brilliant, a child remains bound by societal constraints. We all collectively found relief in her youth, even as we equally dreaded the day those fetters would eventually come undone. Makina was invincible, yes, but she also had no allies.

Even so, she remained the perfect sister. An insurmountable obstacle that my own efforts could never surmount, casting a constant pall over any good grades I achieved. Like a troublesome tumour, eternally reigning in my mind.

I never once saw Makina as human. She was more like a deity, inspiring both aspiration for perfection and awe of something truly great—which, I suppose, is what a god truly is.

But then, in the summer of her fifth grade, our household god was met with a sudden malfunction.

"Dad, look. There's a ghost walking outside…" Makina called from the balcony in broad daylight.

Father, tired on his rare day off, didn't respond. Neither Mother nor I rushed over to her. We were all spent, run ragged by Makina.

"It's burning. Burning. Black, all black…"

Her voice, crying out from the balcony, was oddly calm. It carried a girlish, almost playful lilt, suggesting a prank or a simple mistake. It certainly didn't sound like anything urgent enough to warrant going out to check. …But in hindsight, that might have been the only time Makina ever spoke with her true voice.

Sometimes I torment myself with the thought it was her desperate, final cry for help. Her first and only attempt to reach out to her family. Because surely, had Father simply gone to the balcony that day, even if she'd remained trapped in her delusions, she would've never lost her way.

She remained outside until evening, when Mother finally retrieved her and brought her back inside.

The next morning, at breakfast, Makina smiled at our parents as usual. When they returned her smile with strained, artificial facsimiles, she let out the smallest whimper.

"…Ha."

I found myself laughing too. Ridiculous girl. Capable of anything, and yet she'd only just now noticed something so glaringly obvious.

And so, Makina became the unwitting lead of her own unfolding tragedy.

The moment she realised how deeply she was despised, she scrambled frantically, pouring every ounce of herself into bending the world back into the shape she'd always believed it to be—a stage where her supremacy went unchallenged, where everyone would surely embrace her.

By this point, it was a genuine tragedy. Makina would ambush classmates during their alone time, uninvited. She'd push her favourite snacks on them, bulldoze through their problems with unsolicited solutions, and even, with suffocating kindness, enlighten them about flaws or tics they hadn't even known they'd possessed. Her increasingly frightened peers recoiled further, but Makina charged ahead, oblivious to the growing wreckage.

She went door to door through the neighbourhood, greeting everyone, striving to be a good girl. She showered the same relentless affection not only on children her age but on their parents too. Makina continued this madness, scaling it up to her entire grade, then the whole housing complex.

Once she latched onto an idea, she knew no other way. And it had now backfired spectacularly. She was like a puppet with its strings set ablaze, convulsing through a performance no one cared to witness. If she'd only eased up, perhaps they might have tolerated her.

Instead, complaints flooding our home became a daily occurrence. *Please do something about your child. There's something wrong with that girl.* Each grievance, carried home by Mother, only made Makina dig her heels in deeper, until, predictably, she reached the ultimate conclusion of her misguided crusade.

"Enough! Are you insane?! Stop making a fool of us adults!"

It was Mother who finally snapped. After years of being dragged along in Makina's wake, she was the first to break.

"Ah… Aghh… F-Father, I…"

Makina had always been closer to Father. But when she turned to him, his face held something worse: disappointment.

"Makina. From now on, you stay home. A bad child like you… has no right to do anything without our permission."

And so, they stopped calling her by her name.

From that point onward, the fake smiles vanished from Father and Mother's faces. In this one regard, one might say Makina's efforts had finally borne fruit. Father stopped parading his prized daughter to his superiors. Mother, finally noticing her other child—the ordinarily exceptional one—began speaking only my name, with something akin to relief.

At school, Makina became a ghost, treated by all the students from the first to the sixth grade as simply invisible. I narrowly avoided the same fate by acting as though I'd suffered at Makina's hand more than anyone else. It was the unfortunate truth, but

why would I defend her? After all, her brilliance had blinded me for so long. Besides, I knew that everyone felt the same. She should've stayed a child forever.

The four years after Makina entered middle school were the best years of my life. With the excuse of her new academic phase, she was moved into the room we'd once used for storage, leaving the spacious shared bedroom entirely to me.

The Makina of those years was a husk of her former self, always hunched over, quiet as a ghost. A single word from our parents would make her shriek. Sometimes, she'd glance my way, looking utterly adrift, but one glare from me sent her scuttling back to her room.

Makina was breaking apart. For her, the world had become a terrifying labyrinth in which she'd stumbled into a dead end she couldn't find her way out of.

"...Ugh. Can't something be done about Makina? Shinya, help your sister out. You're her brother, after all."

"No way. That's too much trouble. Mom, don't pawn her off on me just because she's your problem. Oh, right—what do you think about bringing her meals to her room instead? Saves me the hassle of fetching her, and Dad would be happier without her around anyway."

Makina, crouched like a cornered beast in that cramped room, was truly repulsive. Repulsively satisfying, that is.

She gradually lost all capability, and the former child prodigy dwindled into nothing more than a stain on the family's reputation. Of course, I'd given things a little push to help it along. I eventually moved up to the same middle school as her, effortlessly achieving academic success. Compared against me, the now-crippled Makina sank ever deeper into ostracization. She often fled to my classroom, but my glare alone would send her scurrying back. She was ostracized at school, and though rumours swirled about her in corners I ignored, I never bothered to learn the details, intervene, or report anything to my parents.

And so, step by step... society excised her.

"Ah... finally."

I had managed to cage the monster.

Yes, I had always been terrified. For all the years I'd idolised her, deep down, I had secretly longed for her to disappear...

2

By the time Makina entered high school, she was already skipping classes in the first semester. Before summer break even came around, she had stopped attending altogether. She cooped herself up in that dark room, only ever emerging when it was time to eat. It was terminal.

Day by day, her capabilities withered until even basic speech became impossible—like an infant forgetting how to breathe. Mother, grown tired of tending to her, broached the subject of sending Makina to a welfare facility.

Father's reply, of course, remained unchanged: "We don't have that kind of money. You two will have to deal with it yourselves."

I was busy with high school entrance exams, and Mother, fed up with the neighbourhood whispers about Makina, whittled her care down to the bare minimum. She poured everything into me, as if convincing herself I was the only true child of the Hisaori household.

For six months, until my exams were over, Makina was left to languish in that dark room.

And then, foolishly, I let my guard down.

Maybe it was the relief of passing my exams, or perhaps it was simply my naivety. After all those years treating her like some kind of god, I made the mistake of weighing her on the same scale as myself—assuming she'd never speak again.

"By the way, Shinya," Mother announced at our celebratory dinner, plastering on a smile for the first time in six years, "your teacher was considerate enough to place you in the same class as your sister!"

"...Huh?!"

Makina flinched.

"What the hell? What are you talking about? Sis, you're going back to school?"

As a dropout, Makina should've been forced to repeat from the ground up or leave altogether. But Mother, obsessed with appearances despite treating her like a burden, had apparently pulled strings for her to repeat a year, just enough to graduate high school.

"Isn't this wonderful? If Shinya's with her, she might actually attend."

Father, clueless as ever, chimed in as though he had the faintest idea.

He was wildly off the mark. Putting a held-back sister in the same class as her younger brother? What kinda sick joke was that? Were both Father and the teachers complete idiots? Their so-called consideration was utterly misplaced.

"The hell? Don't screw with me. I'm not babysitting her."

If only I'd pushed back harder then. Not merely refusing to look after her, but outright rejecting the very idea of sharing a class with her. No, if only...

"...Ah."

If only Makina hadn't dropped her spoon right at that moment.

"Pick it up, Makina. You dropped it, didn't you? What? Staying quiet won't make things any better. Can't you hear me? I told you to pick up the spoon. Your mother is telling you to do it yourself."

At Mother's command, Makina slowly bent to retrieve it. Father pretended not to notice. Spoon in hand, Makina looked up at Mother with fragile, lost eyes.

"...Um. Mom... feed me?"

The air at the table crackled. Makina couldn't even eat on her own anymore. Mother, her patience snapping, slammed her hand on the table.

"Quit acting like a toddler! What, you can't even manage that now?! Are you *actually* retarded?! When did you turn so useless?! If you don't know how, just copy Shinya! At least then, you won't be a burden!"

...Ah. But Mother, those were the very words you should never have spoken.

"...Huh?"

Makina's head tilted slightly. Her eyes—lens-like, mechanical—widened.

"Mom. Am I... allowed to do things on my own now?"

"Of course! You're not a child anymore. Anything you don't know, you can learn by imitating Shinya. Then you won't bother anyone. Easy enough, right?"

You should never have given her a purpose. Never taught her a means to an end. Never wound up the clockwork doll.

"I see. Okay. I'll start now, then."

This was when the greatest twist in the Hisaori household's story began. And thus... no matter what I did, nothing ever seemed to work out.

3

Being in the same class as Makina in high school was, frankly, the absolute worst. A brother with a dropout sister held back a year—that wasn't the kind of label that suited me. Father's penny-pinching had, once again, screwed me over. Too much of a miser to fork out for better schooling, he'd only let me apply to the local high.

Makina would definitely drag me down. A girl who couldn't even feed herself? They would absolutely eat her alive. Classrooms were ruthless; they stripped the weak of every last shred of dignity. Status, physique, grades, that implicit understanding that someone had it coming for them—Makina checked every box.

And even if she *were* bullied, not a single soul would lift a finger to help her. After all, why bother? If the person you saved was truly helpless, all you'd get in return was more trouble. Nobody did that kind of charity unless they were family.

And yet, to my surprise, high school, which had begun with such apprehension, turned out to be absolutely wonderful.

For the first month, Makina stayed absent.

Since it was the local high school, I already knew plenty of students, and my entrance exam scores had left a good impression on the teachers. Naturally, I became the centre of the class, surrounded by friends and trust. Occasionally, someone would bring up my absent sister, but I was used to fending those questions off. Hisaori Shinya had, just like in junior high, made a brilliant start to high school.

...Except for one unsettling thing. Makina had started leaving her room.

At home, I'd feel eyes on me, turn around, and sure enough. There she'd be, watching. Every single day, without fail. Annoyed, I'd glare back. The old Makina would've immediately scurried back to her room. But not this time. Makina didn't run when our eyes met; she just kept observing me. It felt disturbingly real: a camera lens fixed on me, devouring every detail of Hisaori Shinya as though even a single blink would be a wasted frame.

The unease didn't truly settle in until May.

One evening at dinner, Father was uncharacteristically cheerful, chatting away animatedly with Makina. Apparently, his work that day had gone remarkably well, all thanks to her. ...It turned my stomach. The scene brought back memories of our childhood meals.

"Makina, what good's that birdcage going to do when it's empty?"

"Don't worry. I've already got just the thing for it."

Father chuckled heartily. She rarely asked for things, and Father even more rarely indulged her. Watching them from the sidelines, detached, it suddenly struck me.

Father was calling her by name again, and Makina—who hadn't strung two words together in months—was laughing with him.

Their bond had warmed at an unnatural pace. On Sundays after practice, I'd find them playing catch in the housing complex courtyard. They were out shopping together constantly, too. Some nights, they'd sit shoulder-to-shoulder, watching TV after baths.

"It's all thanks to you, Shinya," Mother said, watching them with something akin to nostalgia. "Makina's finally coming out of her shell."

I had done nothing. Absolutely nothing. Yet in her eyes, Makina's brightening mood was all thanks to me. Something about this made my skin crawl.

"You know, Makina," Father said, ruffling her hair affectionately, "You're like the son I never had."

Makina was *not* a boy, I swear.

...Wrong. Wrong. Wrong! God, it was revolting! Since when did someone that broken bounce back in a month? Since when did parents who'd cast off their own child patch things up this easily? It was all so deeply unsettling, I couldn't grasp the true source of my revulsion.

Then June arrived. And just like that, Makina was back at school.

▪

The nightmares began around this time.

I'd wake, gasping, from suffocating dreams only to find my room plunged in darkness. It was always in the dead of night, after the lights had gone out.

Then I'd notice—the door left slightly ajar.

Something was watching; it was unmistakable.

From the crack came only deeper blackness, unconcealed breathing, and the rhythmic clicking of turning screws.

And in that narrow strip of darkness: a creature of nothing but eyes, its gaze like polished camera lenses...

▪

To any outsider, Makina and I looked to be a picturesque pair of siblings. She gradually acclimated to class, made friends, and slowly shed her past disgrace.

A former truant may be a vulnerable target, but a reformed truant becomes a cause worth defending. Ignoring someone who was trying to change for the better would make me the villain, so as the model younger brother, I had no choice but to quietly observe her rehabilitation, even as it filled me with visceral dread.

Makina assimilated seamlessly into the class. *Wrong.* That painfully average demeanor, those mannerisms—that wasn't the Makina I knew. ...It made me want to retch. That monster didn't belong among us. How could people actually believe such

a brazen, forced smile? How shallow would one have to be to trust a newcomer like her so easily? The world I'd painstakingly maintained shouldn't have been this fragile.

"It's 'cause she's so, you know?" a friend from middle school would say. "Even though she's a girl, she's kinda like one of the guys. She's just really fun to talk to."

"Makina's just like Shinya, isn't she?" another would comment.

"Hm, really? Isn't it the opposite?" someone else would chime in.

"Shinya's the one who's like—"

They were saying we were identical, that there were now two Hisaori Shinyas.

"If you don't know how, just copy Shinya."

Ah... I didn't need it spelled out. This classroom contained another me.

From daily habits to study routines, down to our exact test scores; from conversational tactics to niche hobbies cultivated solely for social leverage.

Every single facet was a carbon copy of me.

Her smiling face filled me with a primal urge to scream, to beg her to stop. Her new life was a complete, perfect rehash of the two months I had painstakingly built.

◇

Makina's imitation grew sharper by the day.

What began as learning evolved into precise replication. From simple reference to complete reproduction. She stubbornly clung to copying Hisaori Shinya—and nothing else.

It made no sense. She was infinitely smarter than me. Even if this started as some whim, incorporating my methods should have resulted in something far superior, an entirely different individuality. Yet Makina seemed obsessed solely with the act of copying itself.

There *had* to be something wrong with her. I could understand emulating someone you looked up to; that drive comes from aspiration, from wanting to become something greater.

But to Makina, I was just… there. No different than a stranger passing on the street. Was it even psychologically possible to mimic the actions of someone you held no interest in? There was no conceivable purpose in trying to become someone you neither respected nor admired. No effort, no matter how great, could yield a worthwhile return. Was this truly the thought process of a living creature? Even monsters, surely, had their own desires.

But I had no choice but to choke down my disgust. To everyone else, Makina had become a bright, rational, and charming honour student. But only I knew the unsettling truth. I, alone, had to play the part of the doting brother to this unsettling doppelgänger.

What a waste of my time. Even without my charade, the balance was shifting daily. The former truant dropout was now as central to the class as I was—Makina led the girls, while I was head honcho for the boys. We must have looked like the perfect siblings.

At home, the centre of gravity had already shifted completely.

In just two months, the Hisaori household had been completely remade. Father and Mother barely glanced my way anymore, their world revolving around Makina's smiles and the family outings she orchestrated. My space in their lives dwindled daily.

"Hey, Shinya. Why don't you let your sister have the bigger room?"

No way. I'd fought tooth and nail to win that room from her. What right did Makina have to reclaim it after holing up in that storage closet for so long?

"Makina, are you free next weekend? There's somewhere I'd like to take you."

How brazen. The same father who once faked smiles now made requests with shameless sincerity. The noisy dinner table had become unbearable. I stood to leave, eager to retreat to my room.

"Oh, Shinya. Watch your right shoulder. If you don't stretch it before bed, you'll wake up with a crick."

And so, even as she played the perfect daughter, showering Father and Mother with happiness, Makina pinpointed physical quirks of Hisaori Shinya that even I didn't know I had. Those clicking, emotionless eyes.

I fled without answering, avoiding her gaze as I rushed to my room. The strain must have been getting to me. My usually meticulous room had grown increasingly cluttered. That night, I collapsed onto bed without bothering to tidy up.

The next morning, just as she had warned, my neck seized painfully. And of course—

"Morning, Makina. Oh no, stiff neck? You alright?"

—there she sat at breakfast, having foreseen even my defiance.

4

Excessive imitation is nothing less than an invasion of the original. From the second semester onwards, the very chair of Hisaori Shinya felt like it was trying to shake me off.

That day, my friends from junior high canceled our plans. Some sudden errand, they claimed, meant they couldn't hang out. It was unusual for them to bail, but I figured these things happen. I went shopping anyway—only to spot Makina by chance.

"...The hell?"

Surrounding her were the smiling faces of those same friends who'd stood me up. I refuse to dredge up how that felt. *They* broke their promise. *They* lied. Yet despite being the one wronged, I stood there feeling like some grotesque intruder. I fled home immediately—being spotted would only humiliate me further.

"H-Hey, Shinya... Actually, we kinda ran into each other when we were walking there."

Stop. Their excuses only rubbed salt in the wound. Had I accepted their apologies, the wedge between us would only grow wider tomorrow.

"Tch... read the room, man. Whatever. You might as well join us at this point, dude."

Piss off! That would make me look like some pitiful loner, forcing himself where he wasn't wanted!

"Hah...hagh...hah...ah!"

I barely made it to my room before slamming the door, choking back the scream clawing up my throat. I wanted to hit something, to lash out and erase this unbearable wretchedness. But my pride held me back. *Wait. Wait. Wait.* There was no need to seek retribution. I had lost nothing. If I acted out now, it would be as if I were willingly throwing myself down. I just needed to steady my breathing, to regain control. But calm wouldn't come. My lungs seized like an asthma attack. As the headache and vertigo threatened to topple me, *click*—the door I'd locked swung open.

"...Sis."

Makina invaded my space, and I retreated until the backs of my knees hit the bed. She stood motionless amidst the clutter, studying me.

"W-What the hell? Don't just barge in."

"Sorry, but I saw you running, Shinya. What's wrong with you? You just took off all of a sudden."

The asthma-like tightness in my chest eased, and the vertigo passed. In its place, an emotion not unlike burning gasoline pooled and smouldered in my skull.

"*Ha...* what's wrong with me? I should be the one asking *you* that. Just how far are you going to take this charade?"

My tongue went numb. This was bad. My throat burned. Dangerous. I knew better than to confront her. They always say it's the moment their true natures are exposed that monsters like her pounce.

"Charade? What do you mean? Did I do something to you, Shinya?"

"...Cut the crap. What was that earlier? What were you doing with Saito's crew? A girl like you should stick with her own flock. Why... why go after my friends?!"

But I couldn't stop. Rage, and a far more primal fear, kept the words spilling out.

"Ah, that." She closed her eyes uncommittedly. "*They* were the ones who invited me. Said you'd gotten boring. Predictable. That hanging out with me would be way more fun."

"....."

A dull *thud* echoed.

White filled my vision. My right fist burned.

Makina didn't cry out. She merely crumpled soundlessly onto the cluttered floor.

"Ah… Huh…?"

Human reason sifted away like sand through an hourglass. There was no exhilaration. This first act of violence was so terrible, I wanted to wind back time. Makina turned away, her hand cradling the right cheek I had struck. It was neither pain nor shock that choked her voice. No. This creature… was… smiling?

"Sis, you're… disgusting…"

Even though *she* was the weak one, even though *I* was the one who'd thrown the punch, I was the one trembling at the legs. Makina's shoulders, though, were shaking with stifled laughter.

"Shut the fuck up! Stop laughing! What the hell's so funny about this, you freak?! Why won't you just be the scaredy-cat you've always been?!"

"Funny? Nothing really. I've just… never enjoyed anything before."

The monster looked up slowly. Her lens-like eyes gleamed.

"You see, I couldn't act on my own. But you know what? Perhaps trying to steal your place might be interesting, Shinya."

A soft giggle.

Indeed, for the first time, she looked genuinely delighted. And thus, the question that had shadowed my childhood was finally answered. What had made her so unsettling? It was ridiculously simple. Makina cried. Makina raged. But never, not even once, had she ever known jubilation firsthand.

"Fun? How?"

Fear had stripped me down to single syllables.

Too late. Had I only begged her to stop, she might have listened.

"Because… everyone prefers it this way, don't they? You can disappear now. *I'll be* Shinya from here on out. Don't you get it? I can play your part better than you could ever hope to."

Something snapped. My fists moved on their own. The next thing I knew, my right hand dripped crimson with her blood. *Stop laughing. Stop. Stop! STOP! The one*

they like isn't you. It's not your life that's going well. Don't copy me. Don't do anything. Just stop! Just stop it! You're just a—you're just a—

"You're just a cheap imitation!"

The impact reverberated through the room as Makina slammed into the wall. The hanging shelf, which had been loosely anchored, tore free, and the books it held rained down on her head. A trickle of blood. Half an inch to the right, and she would have lost an eye.

I don't know how long the rampage continued. But when I finally came to myself, Mother was home, and Makina was being tended to. The wound on her head was minor, already scabbing over. But in exchange, what little remained of my place at home was gone for good.

Father's tirades. Makina playing peacemaker. Mother moved by her generosity. I just stared blankly at the fallen shelf.

...Ah. That had been our favourite project, built together when we were children.

/

The tide had turned irrevocably.

What followed requires little explanation—just an inevitable chain of consequences. My parents became utterly devoted to Makina, while my friends simply drifted away. Terrified of being pushed further and further to the margins, I scrambled desperately to reclaim my place. But nothing worked. Makina played Hisaori Shinya better than I ever could.

I even forgot how I'd succeeded in the first place, reduced to copying her imitation of me.

The mimic had become the model; the original, a pale reflection. Even now, I find myself molding my actions after her vision of who I should be. I no longer remember my true self.

The end came quietly.

In that classroom—my last fragile foothold—I engineered my own downfall, all over something utterly petty. That morning, I found Makina handing out worksheets. That was my job as class representative, not hers. We argued, and just like I did at home, I raised my hand at Makina in front of everyone.

"Why the hell are you doing that?!" I shouted.

But the words that echoed back at me came not from Makina, but from the entire class.

The next day, when I walked into the classroom, my desk had been thrown away.

▪▪▪

Umm… wait… who was the one who dropped out first again? Whatever.

By the second semester, I'd retreated from school, confining myself to my room. It became a disgusting, cluttered ruin. Father made one last token appearance at the bitter end; Mother, occasionally, would come by, a flicker of concern in her eyes. Makina, though—she must've been in this room the whole time.

I recalled the Makina of old, enduring time in precisely the same manner: seeing nothing, thinking nothing. That was her existence.

Right. And that was why Hisaori Shinya was worthless. No longer worth mimicking. *Just leave me be.* I was useless now, utterly incapable.

"Ah…"

And yet, she was always there. In the kitchen at ungodly hours, or in the hallway outside the bathroom. Whenever I turned around, I'd find Makina standing there silently. *Click. Click.* Always observing. Her mechanical, icy voice would then break the silence, those eyes still fixed on the wreck I'd become:

"Well? Aren't you going to do anything new?"

I screamed and fled back to my room, locking the door and burrowing under the covers. The light had been broken ages ago; the shutters remained permanently closed. My room was consumed by near-total darkness, pierced only by thin slivers of light.

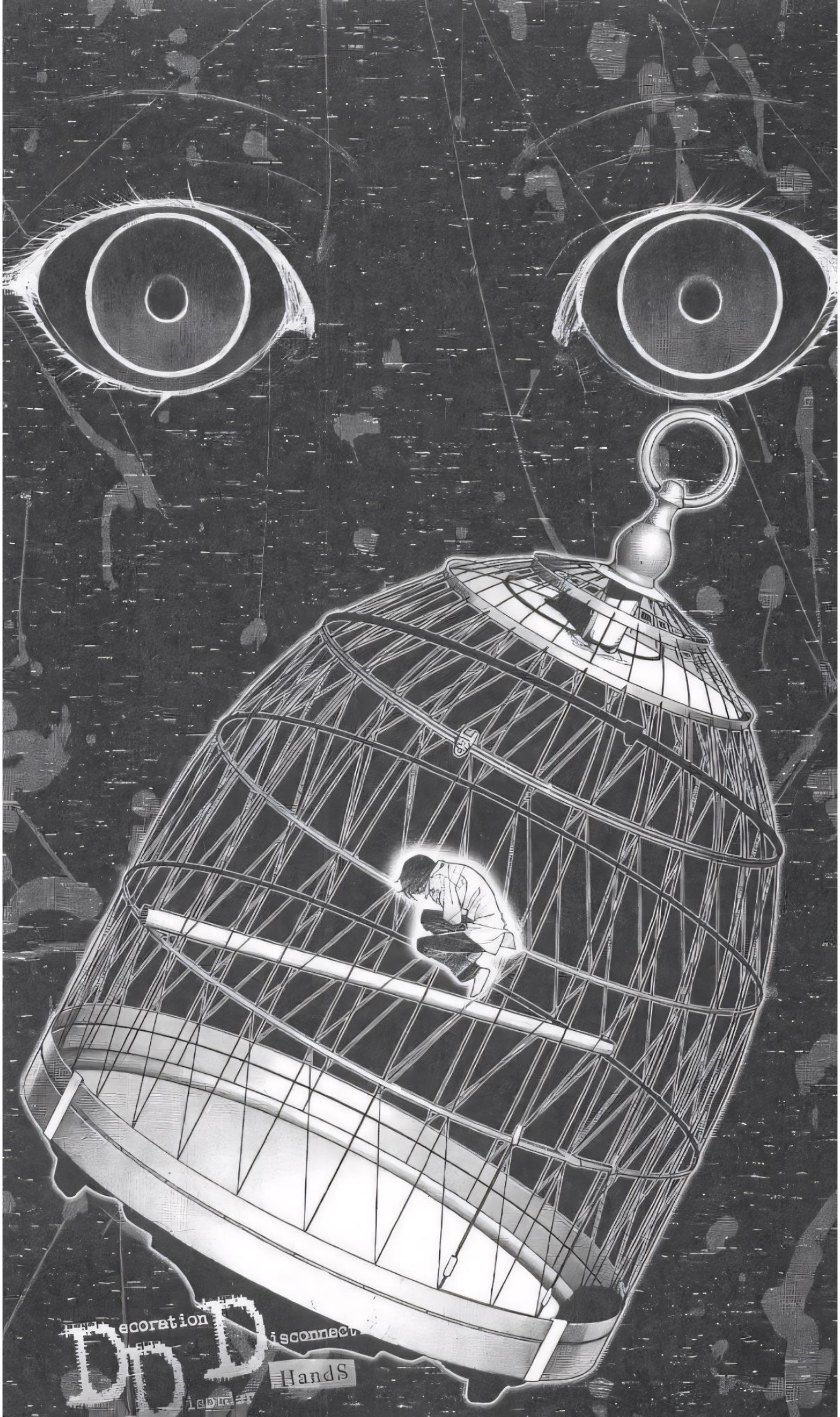
But she saw everything anyway. Even behind this barricade, she continued her observation. *Of course.* It had always been this way. How could I have been so blind? Retreating to this room was the mistake. This was a birdcage, and she'd been watching me within it every single day. How? Hah. As if anything were beyond that monster. If I were to open the shutters now, I'd undoubtedly find a gigantic eye peering in.

"No…nooo…noo…noooo!"

Things were way better when she was still imitating me. Now that I had nothing left to offer her, my existence held no meaning to Makina. A discarded textbook, nothing but junk. Makina had always burned the manuals once she'd memorized them. That was why I hid, desperate to keep her from seeing me completely.

"That won't work, Shinya. Pain's the only thing you'll get if you cut your wrist like that. You should use a sturdier knife, like the one you stole yesterday."

…Someone. Help me. This room… it's like being trapped inside her eyeball.


Decoration
Disconnect
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▪▪▪

In the end… I could never become Makina.

A life lived without thought is a state unreachable by a normal mind. Though I was fractured, I hadn't shattered to that extent. I feared Makina, grew exhausted from fearing her, and focused solely on escaping this nightmare.

At first, I considered how to beg for her forgiveness. Maybe she mirrored me out of spite for not stepping in when she was bullied. Maybe this was her retribution. I hoped that if I apologised, she might forgive me, and from beneath my blankets, I spoke to the presence I knew lurked nearby.

"Why? I mean, I've never hated you or anything, Shinya," she answered while coolly patching up the shelf I'd broken.

From the kitchen, I could hear the Hisaori family's voices.

"Hey Dad, can we get rid of that birdcage soon?"

"Sure, if you don't want it anymore. But why? I thought you cherished it."

"Not really. I've never thought of it as important. Not once. The only thing I kept inside were some useless bugs. And honestly? Watching them was really boring."

"Ha… hah…haha!"

I wanted to wring her neck. Bloodlust that welled up from the deepest part of my soul. My trapped body and plundered mind had reached their breaking point. How dare she display such indifference? As if everything had already ended. After stealing Hisaori Shinya from me, how could she just write it all off as nothing?

"…Right. I was naive."

Vengeance, hatred—those all-too-human drives didn't even register with her. Apologies would fall on deaf ears, for she harboured no feelings toward me whatsoever. So, I had to put something on the table. If she meant to toss me aside as obsolete, then before she could cast me off completely, I'd have to settle the score myself.

The resolve, once kindled, burned like wildfire. Heart pounding, I waited for the dead of night, confirming it was 2:00 AM before scavenging my room for a suitable tool.

...Convenient. Though meant for children, the aluminum baseball bat in the closet would suffice.

"Haaaa..."

Child's bat or not, it was still metal. Being hit with this would undoubtedly hurt.

"Haaaa..."

But this was necessary. I poured every ounce of hatred, every bitter memory, into gripping the bat until my palms stuck to the tape.

...Good. Oh, it's lighter than I thought. I can handle this.

Steadying my breath, I eased the door open silently. All I needed to do was step into the hallway, cut past the kitchen, and slip into Makina's room.

In hindsight, this should've been my opening move. Makina was just a girl, I had the upper hand. A few solid swings, inflict some real pain, maybe even break an arm, and she'd surely reconsider tormenting me further, realising how dangerous it was.

"Haaa... Haaa..."

I crept into the hallway. Four steps to the kitchen. No light whatsoever. It was plunged into darkness. No sign of life. Each step took minutes as I inched forward. Then, simultaneously...

"...Huh?"

Across the kitchen. By the squeaking storage room door, Hisaori Makina stood waiting. A perfect mirror image. The exact moment I entered the kitchen, she emerged from her room.

In my hand, a metal bat.

In hers, a sharpened kitchen knife.

"....."

It was perfect mimicry.

She'd calculated Hisaori Shinya's state of mind, predicted his breaking point, and recreated his rebellion.

But I'd brought a bat to a knife fight. My Shinya sought intimidation. Her Shinya intended murder.

"Tsk, tsk," Makina smiled sheepishly. "Aww, messed up for once. My bad, Shinya. Guess I gave you too much credit."

In that moment, whatever remained of me finally crumbled. I could never win. No matter how I played it, my Hisaori Shinya would never outmatch hers. I hadn't even realised it, but I'd been a hollowed-out insect shell all along. Long since crushed underfoot, just waiting to be swept away.

5

Early 2001. Several months later. This was the last chapter prior to my hospitalization.

The day was Makina's birthday. Though they'd never bothered with it before, Father and Mother had been engrossed in preparations since the afternoon. I barricaded myself in my darkened room, desperately praying for tomorrow to come.

Hisaori Shinya already belonged to Makina. If she willed it, I'd vanish instantly. Makina's birthday. The perfect nativity for her rebirth as Hisaori Shinya.

Thinking back, she'd been unusually pushy since morning, constantly coaxing me to join them, to at least have dinner together today. Absurd. Even being watched in this room made me feel close to disappearing. If I met Makina's gaze under bright lights, my heart might stop entirely.

"C'mon, Shinya. Come out already. Don't tell me you're not showing up for your sister's birthday?"

Had she finally run out of patience with my stubborn silence? Mother, who rarely opened this door, stepped into my pitch-black room. She marched straight to the centre, right where Makina always stood, surveilling the clutter.

"Always sleeping. And this mess… when will you ever—"

—become like your sister?

Shut up. The hallway light seared my cornea. I shrieked at her to shut the door, to let me return to the darkness. But she wouldn't budge.

"Are you listening? It's your sister's birthday, you know? She says she won't celebrate without you. She wants you there."

Shut up. Makina. Makina. Makina. The name spilt proudly from her lips. So deafeningly loud. She didn't give a damn about me at all, only yanking me from bed to suck up to Makina. *Stop. Don't. I can't. Seeing Makina. Watching you happily chat with her. It's too painful. If she matters so damn much…*

"Look. Your sister's waiting for you."

Please… just let me go!

"Eek?!"

I shoved her, propelling the intruder toward the door, toward where Makina's minions surely lurked. *Thud!* The sound of her hitting the closed door. *Crash!* The sound of her falling to her rear.

"Sh-Shinya, you—"

Mother's voice dripped fury. The moment I felt a strange déjà vu, that this had happened before, a snap echoed.

"Huh… HYAH?!"

Mother's throat erupted, blood gushing as miscellaneous items clattered around her.

The faint light from the doorway barely cut through the gloom. The shelf above the door—when had it been repositioned there?—had given way, its contents raining down upon her. Amidst the scattered junk, a gleaming blade now jutted from her neck. It clattered to the floor, having perfectly and cleanly sliced her throat.

To call it beautiful was no exaggeration. The blade had fallen vertically, yet it seemed to be drawn into Mother's throat, hooking and carving with an almost surgical precision.

"Um… Mom…?"

No response. Just labored breathing. So much blood. Too much to tell if she was alive.

"Sh-Sh-Shi... he... p..."

Shinya, help me.

Can't hear you, Mom. You should've practiced ventriloquism.

"....."

I looked at the weapon. A kitchen knife. That kitchen knife—the one meant to kill me. Before I could process what that meant—

"What's all this noise? What happened?"

Father's voice boomed from the hallway. The doorknob turned. Mother's body, a barricade against the door, gave way as Father violently forced it open. Her still-breathing form rolled limply onto the floor.

"...Dear?"

What kind of nightmare met Father's eyes?

To his credit, his response was admirably composed. First, he punched me—still standing there dumbstruck—square in the face. Then, he dropped to his knees to check on Mother. He tore fabric from his shirt to staunch the bleeding. Judging that moving her would be too risky, he bellowed, "Don't you dare move!" before sprinting down the hall. *Thud thud thud...* But perhaps he wasn't as composed as I thought. In his rush to call an ambulance, Father ran through the narrow hallway toward the kitchen and—

"Ghk!"

Thud! He must have tripped over something and fallen. The crash carried all the way back to my room.

But the problem was what came after. No matter how long I waited, I didn't hear any more footsteps, nor did I hear him pick up the phone.

Just silence. Only Mother's ragged breathing.

I crept out of my room. Passed through the brightly lit hallway. And into the even brighter dining room, where Father lay motionless, a blade buried deep in his left eye socket.

"You'll hurt yourself holding that, Shinya."

Across the table, by the phone, Makina smiled. Not a drop of blood on her.

Holding what? I looked down. The knife was in my hand. I flung it away in panic. *Thud.* It clattered to the floor, its stained tip burying itself in the wood.

"...Sis."

I couldn't process what had happened. Only the most basic thoughts formed: Was Father dying like Mother? Was he already gone?

"...Sis."

Foolishly, I still clung to hope. I tried to explain, begging her to call an ambulance.

"Good work, Shinya. So? Where'd it stab Mom? The right eye, or the throat?"

I suddenly understood: the thing speaking to me had clearly finished off Father after his fall.

"Earth to Shinya? I'm asking about Mom. The shelf fell, right? I didn't get to see it, so tell me: was it the right eye or the right side of the throat?"

My head reeled. Makina already knew what had occurred. She cared less about Mother's survival than the exact point of impact.

"...How do you know?"

Terror eclipsed any concern for my parents.

Fine. The shelf. The knife that shouldn't have been there. Father's collapse. None of that mattered now.

But *how?* How could this creature know Mother's condition so precisely?

"Come on, it's just basic math and physics. I know Mom's height, weight, even her stride. A simple equation was enough to tell me this was the only possible outcome. Seriously, Shinya, do you even pay attention at school?"

...*Ah.* So that's how it was.

My room hadn't been built by my own hand. She'd simply steered me toward this outcome. The cluttered floor, the busted light, even the exact spot where Makina always stood to taunt me—every detail had been meticulously arranged for this moment.

All that remained was for the pieces to fall into place. Today wasn't a preordained date; she had simply been waiting, any day, for me to pull the trigger. All along, she had been patiently waiting for Hisaori Shinya to butcher his own mother.

"But… why? Just stop. If it had to happen, couldn't you have let them go in peace?"

I was nothing but a pawn. She, better than anyone, knew I lacked the resolve to kill.

"Huh. Ohhh, I guess Mom didn't make it. You know, standing or falling on her ass would've changed things. I set it up for maximum impact, but the drop distance? That was all up to you and Mom. Tough luck, Shinya. Tough luck, Mom."

If I'd been weaker, if Mother had only hesitated, if the room hadn't been such a mess—maybe she wouldn't have fallen. *But Makina. By your logic, Father over there wasn't left to chance, was he?*

"Mm, now I can check Mom off the list. Let's finally move on to the next step."

Makina turned her back. Her hand rested on the receiver.

"What… are you doing?"

"Can't you see? I'm calling the cops. Gotta report the carnage that just unfolded here."

My brain couldn't keep up. The police? Not an ambulance? But if she did that, the police would arrest her. No matter how you looked at it, this bloodbath was—

…Ah.

"Figured it out? Shinya, you're absolutely drenched in blood. Now, a little pop quiz. The Hisaori household's affairs for the last six months are common knowledge. Everyone knows that you hurt me over and over again."

"……"

My vision narrowed, the world warping like a fisheye lens. Vertigo swallowed me whole, wrenching my body and mind apart. My brain felt like it was sliding out the back of my skull. Makina pressed the button.

"Now, objectively speaking, who do you think is most likely to be the culprit? Pretty obvious, right? Oh, I'm through. Hello, officer?"

"Ah—"

I had to stop her. I absolutely had to. The bat! Why was one conveniently in the kitchen too? It was a rehash of that night—if only I'd broken her arm back then…

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I swung with all my might. The bat connected directly with Makina's hand, still clutching the receiver. *Amazing.* The sound of the world splitting. The phone clattered down. Another swing—this time, smashing the thing to bits.

"Haa…hah…hah…"

I leaned on the bat like a crutch, barely keeping myself upright.

I'd done it. Allowing her to call the cops would've spelled my doom; things would've gone exactly how Makina wanted. But I'd stopped her, just barely. A wave of relief washed over me, when—

"Aww. You broke the phone."

Even with her right arm clearly snapped, Makina sauntered toward the balcony.

"How frightening, Shinya. Are you that afraid of me calling the cops?"

Ha…haha. Hahahaha. AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

"Well, congrats. This is checkmate. The seat, at last, is vacant."

The window screeched open with a dry rattle, revealing a beautiful sunset. The same red balcony where Makina had once claimed to see a ghost, where not a soul had lifted a finger to help.

"But don't worry. Even if society casts you out… I'll carry on your legacy."

Yes. For Makina to claim the mantle of Hisaori Shinya meant my complete and utter annihilation. There was only ever room for one. For her to occupy that seat, she had to eliminate the original occupant, no matter how weak or insignificant I was.

"Sis… Sis, sis, SIS!"

I didn't even know what words I was trying to utter. Was it a plea for forgiveness? For help? Or was I still desperately clinging to the delusion that this thing was my sister?

It offered one final, mocking grin.

"Dumbass... So long, Shinya."

Then, as if in escape, laughing throughout, it launched itself from the third-floor balcony.

Splat.

6

It was the beginning of 2004, three years after Hisaori Shinya was arrested on suspicion of murdering his parents and assaulting his sister.

I was finally permitted to re-enter society, albeit under probation. I'd been given a second chance.

That day, of course, that thing hadn't died from the fall. It survived with nothing worse than a broken right arm. It likely could have emerged completely unscathed, were it not for that. Proof that even *it* wasn't infallible. Whether that was its undoing, I don't know, but subsequent examinations revealed the truth: it, like me, was diagnosed as Possessed and isolated from society.

Its scheme had been ironclad—to hollow me out, to eject me from the shell of Hisaori Shinya—only to be exposed as a devil itself when it was too late. Utterly pathetic. Anyone with a working set of eyes could've realized she wasn't human years ago.

Still, that worked in my favour. My lawyers successfully argued that cohabiting with an Agonist Disorder patient had inflicted immense psychological stress upon me, leading to a measure of leniency.

Upon discharge, my relatives offered a warm welcome, and with my parents' life insurance payout, I wouldn't need to work for a while.

Not that I had any plans to. Three years in that institution had forged me into something entirely new.

This was my last shot. I would not fail again. My goal was to fulfill the responsibility given to me and find peace as quickly as possible. Fortunately, the most

significant hurdle—funding—was already out of the way. What was once only a pipe dream felt startlingly within reach. I'd be leaving certain things to chance, but talent and money often prove interchangeable. Lacking as I was, making use of my funds efficiently could bridge the gap where talent lacked.

Hell, things'd work out, as long as luck didn't screw me over. You see, when one ceases to obsess over trivialities like money or happiness, life, surprisingly, bends to one's will.

/ Hands.cut.

2 / Self (L)

I don't mean to brag, but... my reintegration into society was about as perfect as a train wreck could get.

◇

"...That concludes the formalities. Ishizue Arika, today marks your discharge from this hospital. Henceforth, an appointed presiding officer shall duly oversee and keep tabs on your everyday life. Needless to say, despite your negative diagnosis, your case will be handled identically to Agonist Disorder patients. If any irregularities in your conduct are observed, your presiding officer holds full discretionary authority over your reassessment. Any questions?"

Inspector Touma, sharp in her black suit, glared down at her charge with undisguised contempt.

It was August 2004, and I was breezing through my final discharge hoops in Origa Memorial's examination room.

"...Shozai. Any further questions?"

"None whatsoever, Officer."

I tossed Ms. Mato a lazy salute. Her brow twitched. My superior, who clearly had no sense of humour. *Ah, well.* Just my luck, this woman would still have me by the throat even after I was out. *Somebody, send help.*

"...Unbelievable. Of all times to be declared innocent, you pick now. Why the hell are you people so utterly oblivious?"

"You're the one who scheduled the date. Don't pin every damn thing on me."

For the record, I've never committed a crime. Well, maybe. My daytime memories are spotty at best, so I can't be entirely sure, but at least nothing's been proven. That didn't stop Ms. Mato from treating me like criminal scum, though. Love me, love my dog—except in reverse.

"Hm? Did you just say 'you people'?"

"Sure did. The truth is, Shozai, your discharge was supposed to be a bigger deal. But the situation changed last night. Reversing your discharge was out of the question, but they now want it done as discreetly as possible, out of the public eye. Care to hazard a guess why?"

Ms. Mato spun her ballpoint pen absently, avoiding my gaze. She wasn't fidgeting, she was merely—

"Beats me. But objectively speaking, I do look like a criminal, don't I?"

"You don't just look like one. You *are* one."

Snap! There went Tomato's third pen this month. Even hospital supplies weren't safe from her temper.

"You're agitated. But this isn't about me, is it? They're still letting me out, but they wanna keep it on the down low. Ah, did the person who got out before me screw up?"

"Bingo. At least you've got *some* semblance of a working brain during the daytime. Ah, you there. Fetch me another pen. One that won't break so easily, if possible."

The nurse, who'd been holding her breath in the corner, scrambled to offer her own ballpoint pen to Ms. Mato. Pen number four. If stress relief was what she wanted, she should've just smoked a cig. Not that I'd ever seen her do it.

"Speaking of which, Shozai. Remember Hisaori, discharged six months ago?"

"I don't recall her face, but I know of her. Want me to pull her pages?"

"No need, I already reviewed them this morning. We've determined there are no tangible ties between you and Hisaori Makina. Good grief. She was merely using you as a reference, with you none the wiser..."

Her pen whirred like a circular saw. At this rate, they should just give her a fountain pen; it would result in less damage in the long run.

"Apparently, the public lumps all discharged patients into the same basket. Her blunders are now your blunders. Expect plenty of judgemental looks out there. Not that it'll bother someone as dense as you. As for Hisaori... I'll handle her tomorrow."

"....."

Hisaori, it seems, had been caught up in some sort of incident.

Exactly a year ago, I'd crossed paths with someone who introduced herself as Hisaori Shinya but later turned out to be Hisaori Makina. I had no conscious memory of our daytime encounters, but my notes were filled with details. We'd bonded over our matching handicaps—my left arm, her right—as we talked. Every single entry concluded with "Hisaori. Odd fella."

The truth surfaced six months ago when she was discharged. From what the Doc told me, Hisaori Makina couldn't function without mimicking her brother, Hisaori Shinya, as a means to cope with life. No wonder she seemed so weird. She was a girl, yet her speech and demeanor were entirely masculine.

"So, is Hisaori alright? Ms. Mato, your eyes are kinda scaring me right now."

"Just dark circles. Had to pull an all-nighter thanks to her. And based on the reports, it seems like a false accusation. Trust me, after I drop you off, I'm heading straight to the local inspector's office to pick a fight. Not that I want to defend a Possessed, mind you, but frankly, incompetent colleagues are far worse. God, forensics these past few years have been an absolute joke. Cases are piling up, but the budget just isn't keeping pace. Autopsies? Clinical reviews? It's all just one sheet of paper, done and dusted. If they'd only allocate more funds—"

I simply let Ms. Mato rant. Her unmatchable strength meant that no one ever took her side.

"...Whatever. My point is, Shozai."

"Yes? What is it, Officer Touma?"

"Don't you dare embarrass me. If I had been Hisaori Makina's presiding officer—"

There was no need for her to finish that sentence. Hisaori would probably be halfway across the Sanzu River by now.

"Crystal clear. I'm gonna go live a quiet and humble life, tucked away in a small corner of society."

"You better. You've got one hour left here. How do you want to spend it? By resting?"

"Ah, no. I want to go say goodbye to the Doc. Coming, Ms. Mato?"

"No. I'm not wasting my time on formalities. Go alone. Ah, and one last thing, Shozai… Are you still looking for a prosthetic?"

She stopped me as I began to stand. Her voice was uncharacteristically hesitant.

"I haven't thrown in the towel just yet. Why do you ask?"

"Just… well. If you don't have any other promising leads, I do have one in mind. Frankly, I'd rather keep you two apart, but… the party in question insists on meeting the real you."

She sighed, a sound heavy with genuine weariness. Honestly, seeing this woman of steel so troubled was more of a shock than the offer she gave me.

◇

"Listen well, Arika. What you need isn't confidence; it's finding those who truly need you. Spend your whole life searching for them. That's what you should live for."

"……"

I'd stopped by the confession room for a farewell, and as usual, the Doc was in full romantic philosopher mode.

"…Hmm. What's with that look, Arika? That deadpan 'hurry up and let me out already' face you're making?"

"No such thing. I just couldn't think of any better words to send someone off on a new journey."

But honestly? I never needed anyone to acknowledge my worth. Humans get by just fine without that crap. If anything, life's easier without it.

"…*Haa.* Hisaori, now, she nodded along so earnestly. What happened in these past six months that made you so cynical, Arika?"

"Nothing. Just think of it as me learning how to handle you. Wait, you said Hisaori, right? She dropped by before leaving too, didn't she?"

"Indeed. Just like you, she came to discuss life outside these walls."

"Same as me, huh? Didn't peg her as the type to worry about that kinda stuff. Hey, Doc. She can only function by mimicking others, right? So… who was it *really* that sat in this chair with you?"

"I can't say. That would be a breach of patient confidentiality."

Doctor Roman's saintly smile never wavered. For all his patient advocacy, he remained an employee of Origa Memorial through and through. To him, a patient's health superseded all else. He had the balls to overlook any deranged methods, so long as they led to a patient's recovery.

"Whatever. It's none of my business anyway. I'm off, Doc. Thanks for the last year and a half."

Mostly for killing time, truth be told. Whether we'd meet again depended entirely on my luck and Ms. Mato's mood.

"Likewise. By the way, Arika, did you get the chance to say goodbye to Doctor Touma?"

"Wanted to, but no dice. I haven't mentioned it, have I? Tomato's the type of presiding officer that'd give even crying kids heart attacks."

Doctor Roman's face cracked instantly. My misery certainly tickled him pink.

"My, how concerning."

"I'm more concerned about your sense of humour, Doc. This was supposed to be a moment for sympathy, not comedy."

"Oh, I sympathize deeply… But tell me, have you ever dared to call her Tomato to her face?"

"Ah… just once. It kinda slipped out."

A memory I'd rather forget. Dusk had already fallen—turning what followed into pure psychological horror.

"Oh? Do tell. For research purposes, of course. I've always wondered if Doctor Touma has a sense of humour."

"…Sure, why not. So, right after I accidentally called her 'Tomato,' her face just went completely blank. She told me to stay put and just walked off. Next thing I know, she comes back from the kitchen with an actual tomato. She stood in front of me, squelched it into meat sauce without a shred of mercy, and then said: 'Shozai, is this

what you'd like to become?' So, what do you think? Seriously, she's nothing if not terrifying! That wasn't a joke at all!"

The doctor finally roared with laughter. It's funny how things land—seeing him laugh that hard was as rare as seeing Ms. Mato sulk.

"Haha, how marvelous! Arika, you're truly fearless to your bones!"

"Thanks to that, yeah. Losing my memories was one thing, but this? I'd have preferred to keep my survival instincts."

Ishizue Arika wasn't brave; he simply lacked the capacity to perceive threats. An animal without fear is no different from a moth drawn to a flame, or a baby crawling across a freeway without a care in the world.

"Well, then. Keep shepherding your lost lambs, Doc."

"Indeed," he replied with a gentle smile. "May we never meet again. By the way, did you know, Arika? Doctor Touma, for all her appearances, has an aversion to tomatoes. She can't even stand touching them."

...Huh. Not dislike, but aversion. Now there's a crucial distinction.

The discharge formalities wound down without ceremony, and just like that, I found myself back at my old home—the Ishizue residence in Shikura Hills, Shikura City—for the first time in nearly a year and a half.

Ms. Mato chauffeured me there in her red roadster. The sheer audacity of transporting a discharged psychiatric patient in a convertible defied belief.

Incidentally, the hospital bill turned out a tad lighter than I'd feared.

When I asked Ms. Mato about it, she simply said, "That's a year and a half of your salary. I told you your volunteering wasn't pro bono work."

...Damn her. That brand of merciless professionalism was exactly why she was impossible to write off completely, no matter how hard I tried to keep my distance from her.

"Also," she continued, still driving, "we've found a buyer for your old home. It'll be sold next month to clear the rest of your dues—plan accordingly."

Apparently, she'd already strong-armed her way through inheritance tax and all the other necessary procedures on my behalf. Ruthlessly.

"So… after the house sells, am I just supposed to live on the streets?"

"Don't be absurd. We've prepared a welfare facility for you; you could even move in today if you wanted. I highly recommend it, by the way. You delinquents are way easier to keep in line when you're grouped up in one place."

…Unbelievable. That was precisely why I'd long since abandoned any hope of breaking free from the Tomato Tyrant's iron grip.

"Report to me every four days. Miss a check-in, and I'll assume you've either died in a ditch or gone rogue."

With that, she dumped me in front of my old abode's gate. The roadster's tyres screeched as she spun around and vanished down the street.

◇

Located in northern Shikura City, across the station from Shikura Hills, stood the municipal housing for Agonist Disorder patients: the 13th Welfare Housing Complex. The deadpan numbering made my head spin.

I stepped through the cracked concrete entrance, bypassed the curtained manager's office, and headed straight for the vacant room on the fourth floor. I was there to preview the unit assigned to Ishizue Arika. A faint sense of unease settled in when I heard the yappy dog next door. By the time I reached the third-floor staircase, the full weight of it hit me—I'd be shoved in here within a month.

"Huh?"

The third-floor hallway was surprisingly lively, teeming with some rather suspicious-looking individuals. These were uniformed men in blue, their caps fitting snugly—your quintessential police officers. They were knee-deep in a full-blown house search.

Getting involved would be foolish, but this could be my future home, so assessing the potential risks was necessary. Just then, a guy in a gaudy Hawaiian shirt shouldered his way through the wall of cops, making a beeline for me. Definitely not a cop.

"Hey there. You live here?"

The man—who, on closer inspection, was dolled up with a fair bit of makeup—stared at me, completely bewildered.

"Hello? I'm moving in next month. Does this sorta thing happen often?"

"Huh? Oh dear god, no! This is the first time I've seen anything like it myself! Those boys in blue barged right into dear Arika's room and started rummaging around without permission!"

Now it was *my* turn to stare blankly. The aloha shirt guy seemed surprised yet again.

"...Wait. Are you Arika's brother or something? So *weird.* You look completely different, but there's something so similar about you two."

"I do have a sister, but she's probably not the one you've got in mind. And for the record, I'm Arika too. Ishizue Arika. Wait... don't tell me the person whose room they're currently searching has the same name as me?"

"No way! Same name *and* surname?!"

Despite his shock, the aloha shirt guy studied me intensely, then seemed to struggle with a thought before speaking again.

"...So, uh. You're the real one?"

"How would *I* know? But hey, you're pretty quick on the uptake."

"Huh? Oh, *stop* it, you dummy! I mean, I always thought Arika was a little off, y'know? A girl talking like a guy? Just figured there was some kind of tea there. But wow! So the real Arika was a boy all along! Honestly, it might sound weird coming from someone like me, but don'tcha think that girls should act like girls?"

"Totally. And guys should act like guys."

"Exactly! ...Hmm. But then who *was* the other Arika? I actually kinda liked that kid, even if she wasn't my type."

"Beats me. I'm the real one, which means she definitely wasn't me."

So, to summarize what Hawaiian Shirt told me: a woman calling herself Ishizue Arika had moved in six months ago. For the past few months, she'd apparently been mixed up in some shady business, and last night, finally vanished without a trace. The 'Ishizue Arika' who lived here for half a year also had one arm missing, and despite

looking different, there was apparently an uncanny resemblance between the two of us. Hawaiian Shirt, my next-door neighbour, vouched for it, so it had to be true.

"Still, wouldn't a fake name get outed right away?"

"Not at all! It's not like we hang nameplates outside our doors. And you're not the type to demand someone's whole family résumé the second they move in, are you?"

What kind of freak would do that?

"What about mail? The manager?"

"Oh, please. Like that'd work. Oh, by the way—I'm Niijima. Most of my mail's addressed to Hanazono, though. Fake names, sweetie. And as for utilities? The manager handles all that in bulk."

Clearly, running aliases was just part of the ecosystem in this place. And the manager, it seemed, was an even bigger mess than Niijima, completely indifferent to the tenants' affairs. It's rare for landlords to get chummy with tenants these days anyway. So long as residents only interacted among themselves, fake names wouldn't pose any problems.

"Still, there's gotta be some paper trail, right? Driver's licence? Bank account?"

I paused, thinking. Did they even confiscate licences when discharged? And bank books… well, strangers weren't exactly thumbing through those, either way.

"Excuse me. You there, Ishizue Arika?"

"…Damn it."

Shit! Getting grilled by the cops on my very first day out? My chitchat with Niijima must've given me away. An officer in the hall probably overheard my name and immediately ratted it out to the detectives inside. Seriously, Ms. Mato… since when did the cops around here get so *damn* efficient?!

"Yeah, I'm Ishizue Arika. Set to move in next month. And just so we're clear, the person who used to live in that room is absolutely not me."

I had to nip any mistaken arrest in the bud. But the police were sharper than I'd given them credit for. They'd already confirmed I hadn't set foot in Shikura City until today, and that the room's prior occupant had, in fact, been a different person altogether.

"Thank God… But, uh… any idea who the person impersonating me was?"

"A girl named Hisaori Makina, about your age. It's funny, though. That guy over there keeps saying you two resemble each other, but I don't see anything in common outside of a missing arm. No offence, of course."

"None taken. You're just speaking the truth, after all. But Hisaori Makina, huh? What business did she have with my name?"

Still playing the innocent victim, I pressed him for more.

"Blackmail, fraud.... a bit of illicit trading. For someone barely twenty, she's apparently built up quite the rap sheet. Oh, and—"

His phrasing—'apparently'—immediately caught my ear, but what he said next was even more intriguing.

"And... what else?"

I prompted, maintaining my act as the harmless victim of identity theft. The young detective sighed, as if musing whether it was public knowledge by now.

"This is the big one. She's the prime suspect in yesterday's murder of Hisaori Shinya."

And just like that, he dropped the name of a case already wrapped, one that had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

3 / Self (R)

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And just like that, my honeymoon period—or rather, Ishizue Arika's—came to an abrupt, blindsiding end.

"The young man found deceased in Shikura City's Nouzu industrial district at approximately 6 PM has been identified as 19-year-old local Hisaori Shinya. Authorities, citing eyewitness testimony and Shinya's background, are seeking Hisaori Makina, who was reportedly present at the scene, for questioning regarding—"

The high from the earlier scuffle shattered instantly.

"That's just… absolute bullshit."

The relentless breaking news continued to drone on.

Hisaori Shinya, they said, had been found stabbed to death in the abandoned Hisaori residence. And the prime suspect, as of this moment, was his own sister—Hisaori Makina.

It was incomprehensible. Makina killed Shinya? *How?* What the hell for…?

"How the fuck did *I* become the culprit?!"

But everything lined up so perfectly. I'd been at the Nouzu Industrial Complex barely two hours ago.

When I'd entered the old Hisaori house, it had been completely empty, which meant Shinya's body had turned up after I'd already left. Whoever was responsible for planting it, I had no idea. The only thing crystal clear was that I was beyond screwed. Fingerprints. Hair. Eyewitnesses. There was no hiding the physical evidence of my presence there.

"In a tragic twist, this incident unfolded in Room 303—the very location where Shinya's parents tragically died three years ago. And just like them, Shinya also appears

to have fallen victim to a bladed weapon. As we delve into this recurring pattern of tragedy, our program will be investigating potential links to Agonist Disorder and—"

They'd dredged up Shinya's entire history: the assault case from three years ago, his parents' accidental deaths, his sister's fall from a balcony, and her subsequent diagnosis as a Possessed.

That was their selling point. And now the speakers blared on, detailing Hisaori Makina's past and her discharge from the isolation ward just six months prior. Ungrateful bastards, these newscasters. I'd tolerated their gossip about me before because it killed time, and now they were spitting it all back in my face with a vengeance.

"Are you *stupid*?! They think Hisaori Makina murdered Shinya cause she was outed as a Possessed?!"

Nonsense. Absolute nonsense. No, might as well peel off Ishizue Arika's skin now. I hadn't seen Shinya in three years, and I'd never once nursed a grudge against him. Why *would* I, anyway?

There'd been no reason for those brats to jump me earlier. I was Ishizue Arika then, so they had no business dragging Makina into it. And frankly, no one had the right to seek revenge on me.

"...Fine. I don't understand because I'm incomplete."

Time to switch gears.

I had no idea what was actually happening, but this version of me, Ishizue Arika, was compromised. Incidents that only remained in memory were one thing, but now that my involvement was documented on paper, I only had so much time before the police arrived. The tenants in this complex might recognize me as Arika, but on paper, I was undeniably Hisaori Makina. And my address? They wouldn't even need to look it up. Especially since half an hour ago, I'd just painted a target on my back by painting the pavement with six idiots' worth of blood.

"I can't believe it! Oh, god, why?!"

I grabbed my jacket. My passbook—useless now. I stuffed the cash I'd saved into my pockets, clutched the only belonging I'd kept as Hisaori Makina—a framed photo—and left the room I'd lived in for half a year.

"Shinya, you dumbass. We could've kept this going longer!"

How much of this news was actually legit? That Hisaori Shinya's body was found—that was probably true. But the story about Makina? That reeked of pure station hearsay. If that was the police's standpoint, they would've raided my room by now. Since they hadn't, they were probably still taking their time examining Shinya's corpse. Hisaori Makina would eventually be issued a warrant, but for better or for worse, the gossip mill had condemned me before the police could.

"What do I do, what do I do, what do I do?!"

Gasping, I fled the complex.

I understood the situation perfectly. The fact that I'd been named as Shinya's murderer didn't scare me at all. It was clearly a setup, and even if they pinned it on me, the worst-case scenario would merely be returning to the institute. No real loss there. So then—

"Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!"

Why was I panicking like this? Why was I in such utter disarray? There was only one reason.

"What do I do?! I gotta find a new model. Fast!"

Right. Without Ishizue Arika, I would be back to being Hisaori Makina. Someone for whom, no matter what she did, nothing ever seemed to work out.

◇

I spent ten chaotic hours hiding until dawn, having fled the welfare housing complex for the Possessed. I stashed my belongings for later retrieval, pasted on a pleasant-but-forgettable smile, and blended into the crowds until I reached the rural outskirts. By the time I took shelter in one of the scattered woods, the date had likely already changed.

A nostalgic night. How many years had it been since I last felt like myself?

Unwelcome memories kept bubbling to the forefront of my thoughts: the ghost I'd seen as a little girl, Father stumbling into the kitchen, deathly pale, the dull *thud* of him falling backward after I—just slightly—hooked my foot behind his. And the way

his face, contorted in pain from hitting his head, held an almost curious look as the knife came whistling down.

My right arm ached. Every time I reverted to Makina, I couldn't help but marvel at my past self. Why had I gone so far? There had been no need for such extremes.

"But then again, I guess that's just the price one pays… for usurping someone else's place in this world."

Even so, had I overdone it?

My gears had no upper limit, no brakes. Just as a car like that would eventually miss a turn; a train with no brakes would eventually go off the rails. And I'd already jumped the tracks ages ago.

By all academic measures, I'd been the perfect child. Anyone who heard the rumours understood how great I was. But praise was something I never sought. Truthfully, I could never grasp what 'reputation' even meant—something so vague could never compare to the pull of simple, tangible warmth.

Even then, I felt mismatched, a creature out of sync. My body was built for flight, but my heart was just a four-legged animal that simply wanted to walk on the ground.

So please, God—if you're listening—give this small heart a vessel that actually fits it.

"…Ouch. That's strange."

My right arm throbbed. I suddenly remembered I'd kept the prosthetic on. The thing had worked just fine battling those six thugs, but now it wouldn't budge. Wouldn't go as far as to call it a handicap, but it sure was irksome. I tried to remove it, only to find it stuck fast.

"What? Why won't it…"

Of course, even *this* wouldn't work out for Hisaori Makina. The frustration nearly brought tears to my eyes. I needed to wind my gears quickly. At this rate, they'd track me down in no time. I thought about what I needed most right then—

"Right. This whole mess started because of…"

Karyou Kaie's basement. The place where he'd spoken to Hisaori Shinya—the boy so hell-bent on revenge on his sister. The very conversation that had led me to the Nouzu Industrial Complex, a place I never wanted to set foot in in the first place.

◇

"Oh, morning. You're early today."

The moment I pushed open the door after navigating the dark staircase, the pallid sunlight streaming down from the ceiling's ocean washed over me, rinsing my body and consciousness alike. Every other time I'd crossed this threshold, I'd been hidden behind someone else's skin. But now, of all times, I stood here as my true self, face-to-face with a sight I was never meant to behold.

I nearly forgot why I'd come. For the past hour, ever since this basement resurfaced in my memory, my thoughts had been consumed by a feeling akin to blind, spiteful vengeance. Yet in a heartbeat, that corrosive hunger was utterly snuffed out.

"Hm? What's wrong? You're covered in dirt. Feel free to use the washroom."

Water rippled. The grey light undulated. From the canopy bed, looming like an inverted ocean-sky in this sunken world, an alluring voice cooed out. A perfectly isolated space. Air almost unnervingly sterile. And at the very heart of this chamber, purged of every manner of stain, as if it were the most natural thing in the world—

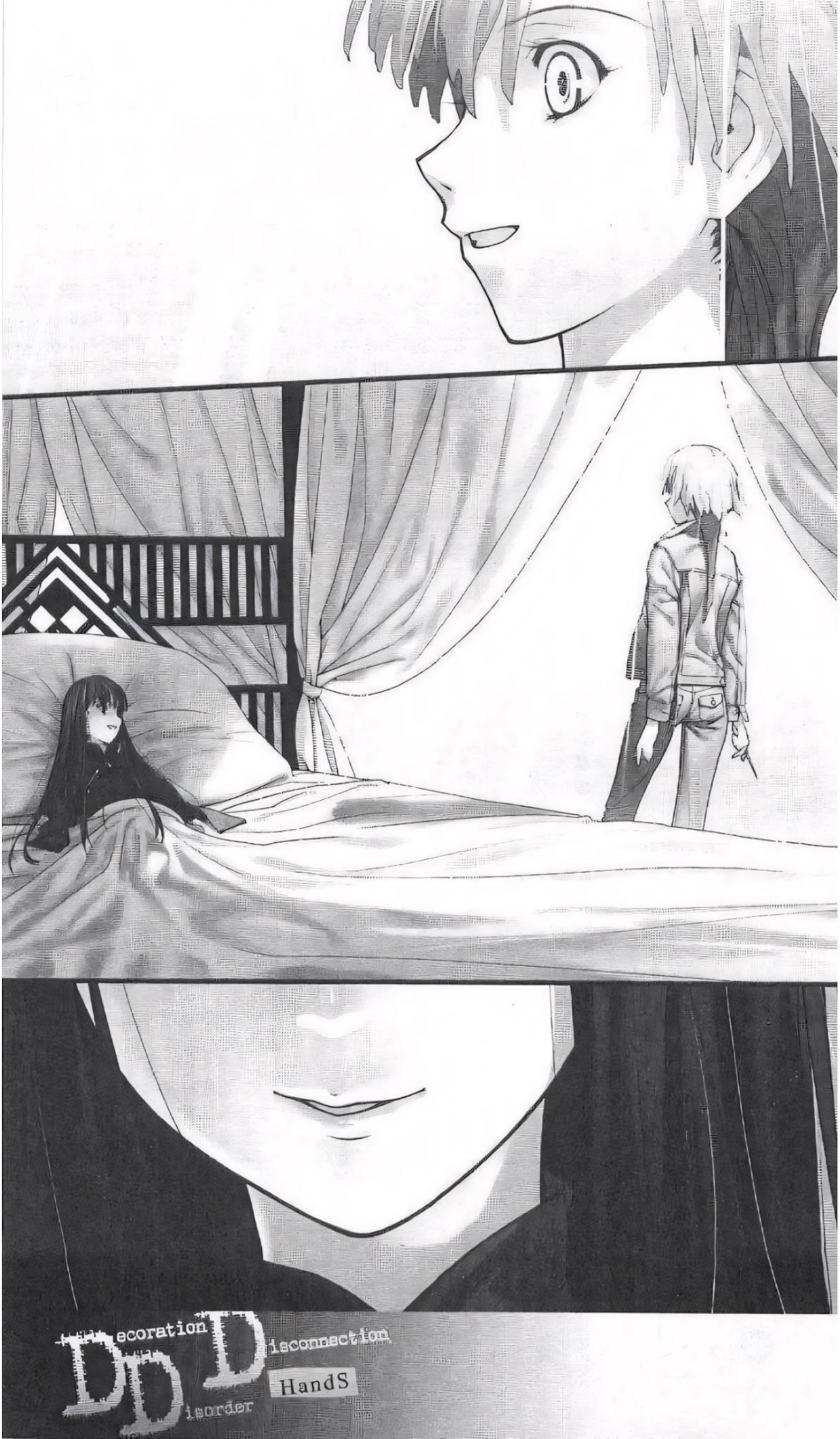
"Come on, hurry up. Tell me something fun."

—sat the most repulsively beautiful creature imaginable.

I reflexively dropped my gaze to my hands. Natural fingers on one, artificial on the other. The smoother, more refined ones belonged to the borrowed right hand. But even those paled in comparison to *its* hands. Formless, vast, invisible hands.

"Karyou... Kaie."

I'd already been overwhelmed. Completely knocked out. I felt like a prizefighter stubbornly staggering on well past the bell despite no hope of winning.


Decoration
Disorder
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"Shut the door and have a seat, at the very least. You haven't slept since yesterday, have you?"

It was pathetic. For the past six months, I'd envied this creature. How could something so malformed remain so… complete? So incredibly calm? Yet here I was, the exact opposite. I'd forgotten how agonizing it was to inhabit my own skin.

"…Yeah. Haven't slept, but—"

Pull yourself together. My reason for coming here was to get answers about Hisaori Shinya. I was weak, and that was precisely why I was continuing to make the worst possible choices. When that wave of realisation hit me, I should have run with all my might. Instead, like a moth drawn to a flame, I lurched forward on unsteady steps.

"Wow, you're a *mess*. I can practically hear the exhaustion from your breathing, but it's your mind that's even more worn down. My bad, let's have our chat later. No one's coming for a while, so feel free to get some rest on the sofa."

Regret welled so hot I could feel tears almost coming out. Why couldn't I have just kept wearing Ishizue Arika's skin? I didn't belong here. If I got caught, I'd never be able to return.

Foolishly, I had to admit it: Hisaori Makina was in love with this creature. She longed for this basement. She wished she could have come here as her true self, before that ghost appeared.

"Nah, it's fine. Just got dragged into some stupid mess. I'm already over it. Mind if I use the washroom?"

I forced myself back into the skin I'd shed. A performance worse than a third-rate melodrama. The mask clung awkwardly, narrowing my sight.

"……"

Silence. Karyou looked utterly unimpressed by my clumsy charade.

"…Whatever. Go ahead, suit yourself. And don't forget your weapon."

I headed to the washroom. Rinsed my face. Slipped the fruit knife into my back pocket. Then, playing the part of Ishizue Arika, as I always did, settled onto the floor in front of the sofa.

"So. I want to know about what happened to Hisaori Shinya yesterday."

I opened carefully. It wasn't working. Whenever I tried to think and speak at the same time, my words stuttered. Even though I'd done my best to bring it up naturally.

"Ah, yes. How tragic. Murdered by Hisaori Makina, wasn't he?" Karyou Kaie stated plainly.

"Bullshit. How… do *you* know that?"

"It was on the news this morning, just before you arrived. The police are calling for Hisaori Makina to turn herself in as a person of interest."

What? Those useless buffoons. I hadn't even laid a single finger on him, and they were pinning the blame on me?!

"No, that can't be right. I didn't do it."

"Indeed. Ishizue has nothing to do with it."

"Right. So… testify for me. Tell them I was here the whole time. No, wait—"

If only this creature would hide me here, I wouldn't have to face the outside world at all.

"Testify? Sure, why not? But… something's not adding up here, is it?"

The black-haired creature let out a soft chuckle, gazing at me with amusement.

"Hisaori Shinya's death has nothing to do with Ishizue Arika. After all, it was his sister Makina who struck him down. That's what everyone believes now, right?"

It declared the one thing I least wanted to hear, in the one voice I least wanted to hear it from.

"Like I said, Makina didn't kill anyone!"

The mask I'd been forcing on slipped off effortlessly. I bit my tongue, too late. But the thing lounging on the bed didn't even flinch at my outburst.

"Then what's the issue? It doesn't matter whether you're Arika or Makina, no? If you didn't do it, then you didn't do it. The police don't hold back when it comes to clear-cut murders like this. They'll dig as hard as they can to uncover any evidence, and if they can't, then they won't leave a single stone unturned in order to reach the truth. *Especially* with cases like this. After all, these things will remain in their records."

"…Hah."

Of course. This creature knew everything.

My useless right arm throbbed. My lips twisted into an ugly sneer.

"…What? What did you just say?"

"I said it won't be long before they realize Hisaori Makina's been framed. But I doubt the aftermath will be that kind to her. Even provisional custody means a return to that hospital, and that place shows no clemency for a failed Possessed, whatever the truth of their guilt."

As if I needed reminding.

Woof. Woof. Woof.

The black dog napping under the sofa stirred at the venom in my voice.

Oh. So *that's* what set it off.

"Hey. Were you and Shinya in cahoots?"

"All he did was ask me to clean up his mess when he came by yesterday. He wanted me to explain things on his behalf if I met you after everything was over. And how could I go to bed with a clean conscience if I didn't hear his dying wish out?"

So defenceless. Even a newborn would have a better shot at staying alive. I thought about shutting its irritating mouth for good, but talking was all it could do, so I decided to let it ramble on a bit longer.

"How long have you known I was Hisaori Makina?"

"I only just found out your name, but I knew you were an imposter from the start. But Ishizue was all I had to call you."

"I don't get it. Did you have pics of him or something?"

"Nope. But his case made the news a year and a half ago—no, almost two years now? It's just public knowledge."

Two years. Back when I was already institutionalized.

"And? How'd that tip you off? I'm missing an arm too, just like him. Oh, is it because he lost his left?"

"I don't even know which arm he lost. It was merely a hunch, that's all. To begin with, Ishizue Arika was a victim, wasn't he? You, however, are far too formidable to ever strike me as prey. And as for gender, it never even crossed my mind. That stuff can be changed in the blink of an eye, after all."

"Ugh. Seriously? You realized I was a fake because of a hunch, of all things?"

I felt furious and elated all at once.

Ah, of course. Fake smiles never worked on this creature.

"Oh? Done with the questions already? A woman of few words, I see. If so, I'd like to wrap up Shinya's request."

"Forget about that. This conversation's between me and you, Kaie. And it's likely that this is the last chance I'm ever going to get, anyway. I ask, and you answer honestly. If you can't do that, we're done."

"Hmm… well, I don't mind. There's no changing the outcome anymore, either way."

Karyou understood perfectly. It didn't matter whether I obeyed or resisted; the ending wouldn't change. No one was coming to this basement, no matter how long our conversation dragged on. Even if visitors were expected today, all the better—let them waste their time knocking. After being ignored for so long, it owed me this much. The least it could do was humour me.

"All right then, let's continue. What did Shinya tell you yesterday?"

"Nothing about you. By his own account, he didn't understand a single thing about you, so he spoke only of himself. He wanted me to relay his tale—his past—and pass along his thoughts on it."

So I was forced to listen to Shinya's long, meandering recital.

His account of Hisaori Makina's history, though clearly biased, wasn't entirely inaccurate.

He described my childhood spent oblivious to my own differences, and the misstep I took in fifth grade. Isolated by others' lack of understanding, I found a way to revive myself in my second year of high school by mimicking how others lived.

He spoke of me being Possessed, and how I had copied everything about him—his mannerisms, his way of thinking, even his academic and athletic performance. But the most inhuman part, according to his theory, was my ability to craft expressions. He speculated that if Hisaori Makina relied on the impressions others formed of her, she could impersonate anyone, regardless of how different their features might be.

"…I'm impressed. Not bad, Shinya. You hit the nail on the head."

"Mhm. That's your mutation. Among the Possessed, it's probably the tiniest in size, a function that doesn't even impact your personality. But it's hardly worth fussing over at your current level. Your abnormality has nothing to do with being Possessed. It's barely worth mentioning when describing the current Hisaori Makina."

It spoke the truth. Mimicry was something anyone could do if they applied themselves. I was merely a natural-born performer; Makina's very essence had been splintered long before the Possession ever claimed her.

"So? What do you make of Shinya's tale, Kaie? Do you think I'm some freak who let my parents die and drove my little brother to despair?"

"Yup. You're demonstrably unstable, you preyed on your parents, and you pushed your brother to the edge. At least, that's the gist of the Hisaori family incident. I don't see either of you as worse, though. Strictly by the outcome, you were correct. You excised Hisaori Shinya from society, just as you set out to do. Your methods were a success."

"Hold on. If you're trying to beg for your life, don't bother. I'd rather not be disappointed. No matter what anyone claims—"

"If you're looking for judgement, I'm afraid you'll need a specialist. Notions of right and wrong fluctuate like market prices; from my seat, I can't call it either way."

"So, from your perspective, I haven't done anything wrong?"

"Just being a Possessed makes me dislike you, but I wouldn't say I hate you either."

Hah. So I'm just a waste of space, huh?

"But there *is* one thing to note. The only conclusion I drew from Shinya's story: Although all of Hisaori Makina's actions were objectively correct, there was one crucial aspect in which you failed."

A chill ran down my spine. I forced a smirk onto my face.

"Oh? And which aspect is that? Killing my parents? Is that why Shinya came back for revenge and left me circling the drain?"

"Don't be foolish, Hisaori. The answer's obvious: the fact that you found a goal to work towards."

Found a goal?

"And just to clear things up for Shinya's sake, he didn't hate you either. Just as you felt nothing for him, he came here thinking only of himself. Don't get things mixed up."

I was more confused than ever.

Shinya *must* have hated me. He'd come here to exact revenge, hadn't he?

"That's a lie. Shinya despised me."

"Only until he was hospitalized. It's true that until three years ago, Shinya *did* despise you. But that was because your mimicry itself was flawed. You could've mirrored him perfectly had you chosen to, yet you always outperformed him by a hair. You had the potential to be a far superior Hisaori Shinya, but you deliberately held yourself back. And so, in everyone's eyes, you became the man-made counterfeit that eclipsed the genuine one. Even if you harboured no ill will, from the perspective of the one being mimicked, it was the ultimate act of invasion. He was left with no option but to defend himself. That hatred was nothing more than the rationale he needed for self-preservation. But over these three years, he came to realise hatred was a wasted effort. To topple Hisaori Makina and reclaim what was stolen, he realised he couldn't confront you directly. Because your specifications were simply too different," Kaie said with a smile.

Ugh, my frustration curdled with every word that slipped past my understanding. *You know what? Maybe it's time I ended this.*

"Hmm. So he made the wise decision to avoid facing me head-on, which was how that bizarre incident came to be? That's quite the achievement, considering it's Shinya we're talking about. After all, he did succeed in cornering me. So… was it you who put him up to this?"

Shinya had come here for advice, seeking the devil in the basement who could kill a Possessed. That would mean the one who drove me into this corner wasn't Shinya, but—

"Nope. Like I said, I didn't have any advice worth offering. Because no matter what I told him, he refused to stop imitating you."

"Huh? Imitating… me?"

"Precisely. He mimicked your compulsion of imitating others. After his discharge from the psychiatric hospital six months ago, Hisaori Shinya cast you as his blueprint, conducting himself exactly as you would. At first, he likely just dabbled in petty crimes as Hisaori Makina, probably hoping to direct the blowback at both of you. But then, you were already operating as Ishizue Arika after your discharge, weren't you? Shinya looked into your activities once you were out and, while surprised, he understood completely. 'Of course, that's just like Hisaori Makina,' he must have concluded. So in response, he adjusted his strategy. He likely intended to eliminate both your Ishizue Arika persona and Hisaori Makina's legal identity at the same time. If either persona endured, you'd simply dissolve into the other."

That ambush yesterday. So those ruffians really *had* been targeting Ishizue Arika. But I know for a fact that I was innocent, which meant another Arika, one concocted by Shinya, must have provoked them.

"I see. So Shinya had been sowing chaos under Ishizue's name. But could someone as cowardly as Shinya really pull off something that dangerous?"

"He probably took inspiration from various predecessors for that. Besides, his only goal was to birth chaos. Anyone can spread poison to the masses, so long as you're prepared to burn money without expecting any return."

...Right. Shinya must have used up everything he had. Did he even have anything left from our parents' life insurance?

"And yesterday's news was fishy too. Hisaori Makina's name surfacing before any police confirmation was simply too convenient. We should assume that information was provided before Shinya's body was even discovered. I doubt he had accomplices, so Shinya himself must have made the call. And with his dying breath, he denounced Hisaori Makina as his murderer."

"Unbelievable. Don't tell me, Shinya—"

"Yeah. When he asked me how to exact revenge on Makina, I told him the only recourse was to forfeit the battle entirely—to kill his own feelings. However, it seems that killing off his sentiments alone didn't suffice."

"....."

So what, he killed himself? Don't go spewing that kinda stuff so casually. That'd be harder than beating me!

"That's all there is to Shinya's case. He committed suicide, leaving only the culprit in his wake. But listen, Hisaori. Even though he successfully exacted his revenge, he still lacks a motive. The one who died may have been Hisaori Shinya, but the one responsible for his death was Hisaori Makina. In the end, this whole affair points back to you. *You* set all of this in motion."

None of this made sense. I had done nothing, yet I was being branded as the Possessed who murdered her little brother. By any measure, this was clearly Shinya's elaborate scheme. But now, it had become my sin.

"Don't screw with me! I was framed, plain and simple. ...Why? Why do you have to be so cruel, Kaie? You knew the truth, yet you refused to help me."

"Because it was impossible. Neither you nor I had the means to stop Hisaori Shinya."

That's utter nonsense. Stopping Shinya's schemes would've been no big deal.

"M-Maybe you couldn't, but... if you'd only told me yesterday—"

"It wouldn't have made a difference. You may possess the capacity to exceed him, but you lack the energy needed to counteract him. Even if you knew what was about to transpire, there was no way for you to overcome that disparity. The Makina of yesterday couldn't possibly have foiled what Shinya dedicated three years to perfecting."

Kaie claimed that Shinya had possessed such strength until the moment of his death. That although Shinya's mimicry was comically unrefined compared to mine, its allure was unparalleled.

"No matter how masterfully performed, an effortless act will often feel hollow. Hisaori Shinya may have been a third-rate actor, but his fervor was unmistakably authentic. Listen up. To genuinely immerse oneself in the life and persona of another, with no ulterior motive, is inherently an agonizing endeavor. To observe strangers and then extrapolate from those observations with pure imagination? Anyone with a firm grasp of their own identity couldn't endure it for even five minutes. Mimicry, by its very essence, is meant to be that taxing."

"Huh?"

I found myself completely disagreeing. Because for me, such a task had never once felt difficult.

"Ah, but of course you wouldn't understand. Not you, the exception from the start. To envision the life of a stranger, one utterly disconnected from your own. Hisaori Shinya clung to that unbearable task with an almost pathological determination. For three years, from the instant you shattered his world, he never ceased to ponder, not for a single second. No solace, no respite—every waking moment utterly consumed by the pursuit of becoming someone else. Unlike you, who actually enjoys the act of imitation. A normal person would find the mere thought of such a thing exhausting, yet he cast aside everything and plunged himself into it. The sheer intensity of his obsession beggars belief. That's precisely what I meant by a difference in energy. Put simply, how could you, who've spent your days casually inhabiting the lives of others, possibly overturn what he accomplished by dedicating every waking moment of three entire years?"

"....."

A chill snaked down my spine. Was it the unsettling curve of Karyou's smile that unnerved me, or the terror of Shinya's so-called intensity? His obsession mattered little to me, but the idea of spending three years trapped inside oneself stirred echoes of my own past.

...*Ah.* If Shinya had indeed become what I once was, then no, he certainly couldn't have been vanquished in a single day. *Hmm, it would have taken at least four days.*

"So even if I tried to stop him yesterday, it was already too late?"

"Pretty much. And what's more, Shinya's method was utterly flawless. A plan crafted for self-preservation can always be thwarted in countless ways, but one that forsakes survival from its very inception? No one could hope to stop him. Suicide, after all, remains the most inefficient, yet undeniably foolproof, approach. Hisaori Shinya, robbed of his own life, wagered his very existence on dismantling Hisaori Makina's."

...That's enough. *Just shut up. I get it, all right?* If he had simply gone off and died alone somewhere, there's obviously nothing I could have done to stop him.

"But even so… suicide?"

That was the one thing I couldn't wrap my head around. And what I couldn't comprehend terrified me to my core. For the very first time, I felt genuinely threatened.

Because that particular solution was one I could never bring myself to choose. I knew it offered a clean conclusion, one that would harm no one, but I'd been too afraid to even entertain the thought. Yet Shinya had done it with such seeming ease. Did that truly mean… he'd been stronger than me all along?

"Shinya didn't even have the guts to kill me."

Could someone like that really go through with suicide? Wouldn't it hurt? I mean, whether you're healthy or Possessed, as long as your heart's still beating, you'd push death away, right?

"Shinya was coherent, wasn't he? If he'd been discharged, that means he'd regained enough sense to think straight."

"Who knows? I can't speak to Shinya's precise state of mind. Indeed, if he'd truly recovered his faculties, suicide would've been out of the question. But tell me, how do you suppose he got better in the first place?"

Right. Karyou had said my plan worked. Shinya had been effectively expunged from society, so his return shouldn't even have been conceivable. Usually, the dead stay dead—that's just how the world is.

"Exactly. You annihilated Shinya's psyche in its entirety. He wanted that place to be his deathbed, but your existence wouldn't allow it. He could not properly die until he had defeated you, because so long as you existed, 'Hisaori Shinya' would never truly vanish from this world. So, he was trapped: desperate for death, yet unable to reach it. And that's why, to finally find his ending, to embrace death, he chose to regain his sanity. He didn't recover his mind to live, but to die on his own terms. A transformation, you might say. Or, more poetically, Hisaori Shinya sold his soul to the devil for the sole purpose of destroying Hisaori Makina."

"……"

Despite the immense gap in our capabilities, we were, indeed, brother and sister. I'm certain Shinya's resurgence wasn't his own doing. In reality, it was my single, critical mistake that birthed this revenge.

"So he regained his sanity purely to defeat me with his demise. *Hah.* So it really *wasn't* hatred driving him. Hey, Kaie… was my mistake, by any chance, similar to Shinya's in the end?"

"In the sense that both of you had your priorities mixed up, yes. You made just one misstep. Three years ago, for the first time, you intentionally mimicked Hisaori Shinya, not as an end in itself, but as a means. Before that, it was different. You took what was a way for you to survive… and turned it into a source of pleasure, just for fun."

"I've just… never enjoyed anything before. Perhaps trying to steal your place might be interesting, Shinya."

Ah. So *that* was it.

"Your mimicry worked *because* it was the purpose. Because it was its own endpoint, imitating anyone yielded no results. Yet you weaponized it. Used it as a tool to kick your brother down. And naturally, means lead to results."

"Dumbass… So long, Shinya."

Fine. I'd admit it. I'd truly enjoyed it.

Even as I'd jumped from that balcony, I'd relished the sight of Shinya's tear-streaked face. And hadn't I declared it myself? When I was institutionalized as a Possessed, I'd labeled it the price for my single, solitary failure.

"I see. So, in the end, I exacted revenge upon myself."

Precisely. The boy in the basement offered a smile, as delicate as a blooming flower. Call it karma, really.

◇

"Ah, I really was an idiot, wasn't I?"

While coming here might have been the worst possible choice, perhaps it was simultaneously the best.

The sudden ruin that enveloped me yesterday finally clicked into place. My mind felt astonishingly clear now, and all my former anxieties seemed utterly inconsequential.

Yeah. There was no point in dwelling on the past. Hisaori Makina always had more urgent things to tend to, anyway.

"That closes the book on everything Shinya left me with. So, what now? Will you make a run for it, or allow yourself to be apprehended? If it's the latter, I hope you haven't left any loose ends."

Loose ends? You talking about those brats from yesterday's incident? No need to worry, I'm sure someone probably took care of them already. And as for everything Shinya orchestrated under Ishizue's name—well, it'd inevitably circle back to him.

"Oh, and here's the finishing blow. The real Ishizue was discharged yesterday. He's likely made it to the welfare facility by now, I'd wager."

It didn't matter. He was useless to me now.

My hand instinctively went for the knife tucked into my back pocket. Its unyielding texture sent a thrill through me. Blood surged, hot and alive, into my stiff, unmovable white right hand. What was I to do? Return to the hospital? It wasn't the worst option, but no, Karyou. Not after I'd found somewhere far more agreeable. Seeking the superior choice felt only natural.

"Hey, I need a new model to copy."

Perhaps, at this moment, this was the first time in my life I had actually yearned for something of my own.

"...What?"

Still reclined on the bed, it gazed up at me. No arms or legs, no escape. See? I always knew it would come to this.

"You heard what I said. So could you please die for me?"

The arm of jubilation pulsed back to life, while the dog of loathing fell silent.

"...Why? If your intention is to mimic me, you'd be better off doing that somewhere where no one recognizes you. There's no need to become the original. Wasn't that Hisaori Makina's whole deal?"

"I can't deny that. But I don't think I'll ever find another room quite like this. Oh, and you're filthy rich, aren't you?"

"Well, that *is* true. But what's your play here? Murder me, sever your own limbs, and take my place? Do you truly believe such a substitution is even possible?"

"I do. Sure, there'd be inconveniences, but I figured I'd kill you first and work out the details later."

There were countless ways to do it. All I desired was this particular room. The real thing wasn't necessary. Besides…

"How should I put this? It really feels like you set me up, doesn't it?"

Or perhaps… was this surge of jubilation, this inexplicable urge to kill, born from admiration?

The knife descended, and the world fractured into shards. I was terminated before I could so much as strike. In the mere blink of an eye, my limbs were consumed.

"…Seriously?"

With a sudden, wet *splat*, I heard the ominous sound of a dead sea crashing down from the ashen sky.

4 / Self (L)

◇

"Huh? The prosthetic arm you mentioned this morning?"

Deep in the woods on the outskirts of Shikura City lay a reservoir, conspicuously absent from any map. And beneath that, rumour had it, lurked an unknown basement.

"That's... quite something. Ms. Mato, you're actually kinda—"

'Romantic' was the word that came to the tip of my tongue, but I bit it down. Even over the phone, the Tomato Tyrant could rupture eardrums from miles away. Absolutely.

"I have my doubts too, but the intel seems to hold up. Listen closely. I'm sending you the address now. See that it's taken care of today."

I cross-referenced the provided address with my map. My current location was a phone booth outside the 13th Welfare Housing Complex. The destination? A journey back to Shikura Hills, then further into the rural countryside.

"Huh. Check out this huge-ass mansion, Ms. Mato. How do you even read this kanji? Uh... Ka... ryou?"

"No idea how old that map is, but the mansion was demolished ages ago. It remains private property, but I've already informed them of your visit, so rest assured."

"Roger. If I head there now, it'll be nightfall. Will the host be... agreeable?"

"That *thing* is always agreeable. Especially after the sun sets. And Shozai, remember to contact me once you're done."

"...Sure thing, but what if our negotiations fall through? You're the type to dock points for pointless calls, Ms. Mato."

"Not this time. You're to call me no matter the hour. Your life is on the line here, after all. I need to know you're still breathing before I can properly enjoy my booze. Later," she said, cutting the call abruptly.

And so, Ms. Mato's oddly girlish fantasy proved to be real.

The clouds had parted, unveiling a cavernous night sky, and the August moonlight, warm and yellow, washed over the vista.

A heavy iron door, unlocked, marked the massive, cube-shaped reservoir. Beyond it, a staircase plunged into a narrow, unlit passage. I felt my way down the steps, along the corridor, and pushed open the door at the end.

Inside lay a room both cramped and impossibly vast, like a chamber pulled straight from some surreal castle. The ceiling was a single, enormous water tank, the moon's reflection undulating across its surface.

"Hello? Sorry for intruding," I called out into the overtly sinister basement. A sane person would have bolted already, but sadly, my survival instincts were defective.

At the room's centre stood a canopy bed. As if some kind of joke, a fruit knife lay discarded right beside it.

"Good evening, thanks for coming. You must be Ishizue Arika?"

A pair of translucent eyes peered from the bed. Bathed in moonlight, it was unmistakably a peerless beauty.

"Ah. So the real one has white hair."

The black-haired beauty—no, girl really—cheerfully piped up. A canine creature suddenly appeared, snuffling affectionately at my feet.

"Evening. You're Karyou? Heard you've got some high-grade prosthetics."

"Indeed, I do. Not many, but a handful of rare ones. They're a bit finicky, but, as fate would have it, they seem to have taken a liking to you, Ishizue."

Woof, woof! The black dog barked brightly. Friendly little thing, I mused, pausing to pet it.

"Wait, you…"

The occupant of the bed was no ordinary living creature. Missing limbs aside, every fiber in me twisted with visceral revulsion. For the first time, even after all my time in the hospital, I felt a real, palpable danger radiating off the child before me.

"Are you… even fucking human?"

It opened its eyes vacantly, and with an eerily immaculate face, smiled, genuinely delighted.

"The real you is just as I envisioned. Nice to meet you, Ishizue Arika. I'm Karyou Kaie. Yes... I suppose expressions alone aren't enough to establish a whole character, huh?"

"Huh?"

The inscrutable entity offered an equally inscrutable greeting.

Thus began my first encounter with this little shit, mere hours after discharge. And the start of my literally inseparable ties to the devil in the basement.

/ Hide and Self.

◇

"And that about covers everything from the day you showed up, Arika. The story of the fake Possessed—Hisaori Makina."

"Yeah, no. I ain't too sure how I should be reacting right now."

It was a nondescript day in August, three weeks after the Hisaori Makina debacle. The tedious monologue had finally ended in Karyou Kaie's basement, where the temperature dropped with the setting sun.

"I only know about Hisaori from my notes, you know. I can't exactly serenade you with one of those nostalgic stories you like so much."

When Kaie got too hungry, he'd ask me to share some memories from the hospital in order to fill his stomach. Bringing up Hisaori now was probably just a ploy to fish for details about her time there.

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about that. I just wanted you to remember Hisaori Makina's story because it's important for you. Personally, I couldn't care less about her."

"I thought Possessed were your favourite food, no buts about it?"

"Depends on the portion. Do you think a steak under a measly 200 grams would be enough to satisfy your appetite? Her mutation was simply too insignificant to even register."

Not that I'd even seen a steak since discharge. It had been nearly a month since I'd taken on this peculiar gig as Kaie's caretaker, and I still wondered when in the hell this insufferable brat would finally cough up my first paycheck.

"So? Why exactly does Hisaori's story matter to me?"

"She's one of your fellow dischargees, you know, one who mimicked you. And it seems you haven't quite adjusted to life here yet. I thought hearing about someone who left six months earlier might prove instructive."

"Instructive, huh? So what became of her charges? Are they still pinning Shinya's murder on her?"

"Hm? No, that was definitively ruled a suicide. Her last offence was deserting her reporting duties as an Agonist Disorder patient. Essentially, she fled from her presiding officer and hasn't been seen since. Honestly, I have no idea where she went."

"Lucky her. If *I* tried that, I'd probably be floating in this very reservoir by morning."

"Ugh, no thanks. If you're going to run from Ms. Mato, at least have the decency to flee in the opposite direction. I'd absolutely hate for the water to get murky here."

There it was. Wherever she'd disappeared to, Hisaori had gotten lucky. She was probably still kicking, as long as her supervisor wasn't Ms. Mato.

"Hey. Are you jealous of Hisaori Makina?"

Kaie smirked, batting his lashes. *Piss off.* Even now, that look still had the power to send tingles all over me. *Don't fall for it. That face is dangerously captivating, but let's not forget. He's a guy, for fuck's sake.*

"Not really. Just figured she must've been a pain in the ass. Speaking of, what's the deal with that imitation of hers anyway? Other people's lives are just for observing. There's no point overthinking it."

That was my take. Hisaori Makina simply wasn't cut out to be a Possessed. Humans could barely handle their own shit; most of us only remembered the gloss of someone else's life, let alone comprehending their inner worlds. There was no need to dwell on it.

And yet she'd grasped the entirety of others with perfect clarity. Unconsciously, she had become a monster, capable of achieving what Shinya had only managed through sheer, obsessive will: the virtual reconstruction of another's entire life. In short, her imagination was dangerously potent. Which is precisely why she'd been tormented by the moronic delusion that she was missing it somewhere. But life, after all, always balances out. Great successes often come hand-in-hand with equally great failures. Isn't that, in its own way, a perfectly healthy existence?

Not that I'd know, of course. Hadn't she been the model honour student in her childhood? Her original mistake wasn't being a Possessed, nor was it her innate intellect. It was conflating two utterly opposite ways of living for the same thing: striving to be liked by as many people as possible and trying to avoid being hated by just as many.

"Nice. *Mmm*... I just can't get enough of that side of you, Arika."

"And I've just about had enough with that obscene voice of yours."

The last thing I wanted was to end up on the same side of the spectrum as Niijima. And could he please stop with that condescending look? It was like he could see right through me.

"Then, a question for our kind-hearted Arika. If you were to imitate someone, what would be your reason for doing so?"

Typical Kaie, sidestepping the who in favour of the why, just to be difficult.

"Dunno. Never done it, so I wouldn't know. Maybe out of admiration, or a longing to become like them?"

The desire to become the real thing. Hisaori Makina, surrounded by fake smiles, had always chased authenticity.

"Unlikely. If all she wanted was to become the real thing, things would've been so much simpler. She could've just succeeded in life like those people. There would have been no need to imitate anyone."

So it wasn't about idolising the original.

Which meant—

"I see. So she copies others 'cause thinking for herself is that much of an ordeal?"

In other words, she'd forsaken the act of thought entirely. Her mimicry was nothing short of pure mechanization.

"Yep, that's Hisaori Makina's true nature. She dissects other people's lives down to the very core, and as a result, abandons coming to her own conclusions. Her cognition runs backwards, you might say. We, for example, live by constantly juggling priorities and thinking as we go, just like riding a bike. But she starts by winding the screw. She pre-processes the lives of others, what would likely take us years of thought, and then begins to act. Take her imitation of Hisaori Shinya, for instance. Each

morning, she'd spend a few minutes 'winding the screw' of Hisaori Shinya's thoughts, and from then on, she'd possess no will of her own until she fell asleep. The sheer energy needed for that pre-processing is, I'd venture, among the highest, even for the Possessed. Had she not misapplied it, she truly could have been omnipotent."

"I still don't get it. What're you trying to get at?"

"Through relentless pre-computation, she rendered thought unnecessary. It was pure clockwork. I have no idea what shattered her to that degree, but Hisaori Makina was incapable of dreaming or hoping unless she was imitating someone."

Kaie's words held a significant implication. Hisaori's motivation wasn't dreams or hope; those were merely byproducts. What he meant was that she couldn't exist without erasing herself.

"....."

What an utterly exhausting existence. Might as well say she lived solely to suffer.

"Wait, where are you off to? We're just getting to the crux of it. You see, Arika, the reason I brought up Hisaori Makina is—"

"Save it. Let's keep that for when the sun's out. I'm grabbing dinner with Tsuranui."

I said goodbye to the basement's only saving grace—its comfortable sofa.

A morose, yet surprisingly enlightening tale.

Just a month after my discharge, Hisaori Makina had, quite by accident, handed me what I'd been clumsily searching for—a compass that would guide me through life—by showing me the exact opposite direction to go.

/

"Hello. Is this Ishizue Arika?"

"Yeah, that's me. Who's asking?"

"Me? Well, I... no, I'm her now, I guess. Long time no see. How've you been?"

"Getting by, I guess. What about you? Still holding up?"

"Not bad, thanks to you. My right arm's a bit out of sorts, but otherwise, I'm fine. Actually, I even leveled up because of it. Pretty sweet, right? If we ever meet again, I'll show you an even better imitation of yourself, Ishizue."

"...Hold up. Possessed can level up? How does that work? Bread? Blood sacrifice?"

"Mainly through natural talent and skill. Can't have one without the other, it seems. And you've got neither, Ishizue. Then again, you're not even Possessed to begin with."

"Good to hear. So, what's this all about anyway? Don't tell me you've got a crush on me or something."

"You wish. I couldn't care less about you, Ishizue. I don't need a reason to mimic people, I simply can't function without it."

"Feels like I've heard that one before. Are you serious? Is it that bad? I think you might be too far gone, man. That kind of pathological compulsion's pretty much a prerequisite for your kind."

"If you mean too far gone to save, then yeah. But we're not all that different, you know? Why do you always gotta be so hostile?"

"Cause I don't want anything to do with you. You can't live without it? That's bullshit. You people have it all backward. First you just live. Purpose only comes later."

"...So you don't have one, Ishizue?"

"Nope. But thanks to freaks like you, it became perfectly clear. I just want to live as easily as possible. Needing a reason just to breathe? Fuck that."

"Huh. You've really changed, Ishizue. Thought you used to be much more pessimistic. Oh, well. I called for something else anyway. You still have yesterday's evening paper, right? Don't throw it away—check inside. My stay barely lasted six months, but I tucked in some useful notes."

"Notes? What the hell is this? Calorie counts? Food preferences? A manga wishlist? How is any of this useful?"

"Thought it might help you curry some favor, that's all. Ugh, clearly didn't work, though. How annoying, why did I even bother with this?"

"That's my line. Why'd you even call me?"

"Well, it was Karyou's last request, so I had to see it through. Oh, and your sister asked me to deliver a message: 'I'll be out when I'm a little stronger, so don't get yourself killed till then, big bro.' Alright, then. Later, Ishizue."

"Yeah, later. Wait, who were you again?"

/

"...Dear me. Of course that blockhead forgot."

I clicked my tongue in annoyance and stepped out of the phone booth.

I'd now taken care of everything I'd promised. But out of sheer spite, I decided not to relay the most crucial words—the ones I'd inherited from Yamada, whose name, it turned out, was fake all along.

I knew Ishizue as intimately as he knew himself. And the Ishizue Arika in my mind would, at the very last moment, step on a landmine. If my imitation was worth trusting, their friendship wouldn't last.

"Bet you'll meet your end before your sister even gets the chance to kill you. I'll be impressed if you last a year, Ishizue."

It was time to switch gears. Remaining as myself would only lead to ruin. I quietly wound my screw.

Well, then. There was no room to be picky now; it was time to find and borrow the life of some random stranger.

／ Ornamental Masquerade End

/ 3.5 / self (R)

I heard it then—a resounding splash.

From the ashen sky, the sound of the sea dying as it plummeted.

◇

It invaded my entire being, as if I'd been plunged into fire.

Acid rain permeated every inch of skin, every shred of flesh, seeping through to the very cells. From the crown of my head to my heels, as if I were being mulched alive in some monstrous blender.

"Hah...ah!"

It was torture bordering on ecstasy. Even my moans shattered into fragments. With eyes seemingly diced into cubes, I was faced with fractured ashen sunlight, the sundered sea, a crescent-moon grin, and the phantom of a leviathan adrift in the abyss.

"Aghhh... huh?"

Right. A phantom.

I wasn't dissolving; I wasn't coming apart. Looking up, the aquarium remained unchanged, no sign of a fallen sea. No dampness on the floor or walls. And yet, in a bizarre and terrifying twist, I was soaked to the bone.

"Hey, the glass just broke, didn't it?"

"Glass?"

The limbless child cocked his head, our perceptions clearly at odds. What I had perceived as glass, what I had thought was water, apparently held no such labels for him.

"You don't quite match up with Sorrow's preferences, it seems. Ah, I see. Someone already stamped their mark on you long ago, didn't they?"

The grey sunlight dimmed. In the aquarium above, a gargantuan fish had suddenly manifested, unannounced. Its shadowy form, like an eye unto itself, fixed its gaze upon me.

"*Haa... Haa...* That fish... it looks *exactly* like that ghost. I see. Yeah, I knew something was off."

Honestly. Forget whether fish could even live in water clear enough to see the sky—nothing resembling that was in any encyclopedia.

"Hey. Did I... mess up again?"

I couldn't kill it.

At least not here, in this basement. Here, it was invincible.

So I would be killed instead.

That's the way of the natural order: strike first, and retaliation is inevitable.

"Indeed. You truly are a fool, Hisaori Makina. Copying me is fine and all, but who told you that you can't become the real thing if the original still exists?"

The knife clattered to the floor. Drenched like a drowned rat, I bowed my head and endured Karyou's lecture.

"Besides, you can hardly call it an imitation if you replace the original. Copying those who succeed—that was your whole purpose, wasn't it? If you become the real thing, what will you even imitate next?"

He was right. A flawless copy of a dead person isn't imitation—it's recreation. What I did was mimic the living. If I were to copy something that no longer existed, I'd simply become Hisaori Makina, inheritor of the deceased.

"Yeah, you're right. I shouldn't have sat in the chair; just looking at it was enough. Sorry, I'll be more careful next time. So... can we just forget this happened?"

"Sure. It's not your fault that Sorrow rejected you, after all. Consider this round a draw."

"Haa..."

I heaved a sigh of relief. Either way, I needed to get the hell out of here. My legs wouldn't stop shaking. I wasn't ready to even spare a glance at that chair, not yet.

"Well, goodbye then. I'm quitting this job today."

Right, I had to return this fused, unremovable right arm first.

"Hey, Kaie. About this prosthetic—"

"Ah, feel free to hang onto Jubilation for a while longer. Things are looking pretty grim for you down the road, after all. One can never have too many hands to count on, can they?"

"You sure? I might never come back to return it, you know."

"Doesn't bother me in the slightest. Loathing alone can cover for it if I ever need a replacement. And even if you don't manage to make it back, it'll find its way home once you're dead."

My trembling legs kicked up another notch. Yikes. Damn, I really *do* like this guy, huh?

"Anyway, do you have a plan? If money's an issue, I can give you your bonus upfront."

"Nah, money's not a problem. Shinya earned enough for me. As for the rest… getting out of the prefecture would be pretty tough. No, impossible, even. I'll just lie low in this city till the dust settles."

I headed for the exit. Once you decided to run, you had to act immediately. I doubted the police would sniff around here, but that inspector—Karyou's acquaintance—probably would.

"Ah, wait. One last thing. When things settle down… could you call Ishizue Arika for me?"

"Why?"

That was a little unexpected. Was he really the type to saddle me with something as absurd as calling Ishizue?

"What do you mean, 'Why?' You put in half a year here. As the last name on the payroll, don't you owe your successor a proper handoff?"

Karyou smiled. It was the same flawless, trusting grin he'd flashed me the day we'd met.

And thus, I departed the basement, job concluded.

"…Tch."

In the end, he never once deigned to speak to me. I longed to make him understand, but as things stood, I didn't stand a chance.

As I trudged through the desolate woods, a conversation from a year and a half ago welled back up. My encounter with Ishizue's younger sister, the newcomer from Ward D, amidst the rhythmic tremors of the gymnasium.

"Tell me, what do you think of the Possessed? Do you still believe them to be patients who ought to be confined? Or is it simply that any who cannot live a 'proper' life are inherently weak?"

The black-haired beauty, though younger than myself, met my gaze with the same vacant, uncomprehending stare as her brother's.

"Huh! I've never really looked at it that way. If strength is our benchmark, then we're totally on the side of the strong. I mean, we're all built pretty tough, wouldn't you say?"

Thud.

The sandbag soared, a nightmare given form. Eight metres of chain and sixty kilos of dead weight shrieked under the strain.

"Tough? In what way? I mean, *you* definitely look like you could take a beating."

"Not the body, the mind. We're both pretty sturdy, aren't we, Hisaori? Our hearts are so dulled that nothing cuts anymore—not the death of loved ones, not the alienation from everyone else. It's like nothing really matters at all."

Thud.

A sliver of lethal intent infused the force of her blows. People claim the Possessed are akin to swollen cerebral tumours, sprung from frailty of the mind. Yet here she stood, asserting precisely the opposite: that it was strength that damned us into being.

"But it's exhausting, isn't it? We're stuck in this same spot where nothing really matters, but we can't stay put either. We're perfectly fine the way we are. Our existence might cause problems for the people around us, but we never cause *ourselves* any problems. And yet, for no reason at all, we're desperate to change ourselves. But the truth is, we don't really have to, no?"

With a laugh, she sent the sandbag soaring again, a burst of pure, almost joyful violence. Agony and euphoria. She clearly loved every inch of herself.

"By the way, why are you even *doing* this?"

"Hm? This? Well, we humans are all about self-improvement, y'know?"

It seems Touma Mato had forcefully restrained and dragged her to the hospital.

The shock must have been immense—not from any physical wounds, but from a deep psychological blow. Despite being biologically superior, she'd been completely outclassed. Lost in her belief of being extraordinary, she was bested by an ordinary human, armed with nothing but sheer discipline.

"Can't be helped. We spent so much time torturing our minds that we forgot to harden our bodies. So now, I'm making up for it. I could stay like this, sure… but if I don't change a little more, I'll never stand a chance against her."

Thud. CRACK.

With one final, decisive roundhouse kick, the sandbag splintered against the wall, never to swing again.

"…Damn. That girl's something else."

She might just be the *only* Possessed with that brand of optimism. Back then, I'd dismissed her words, too preoccupied with viewing my own quirks as weaknesses. But it now finally made sense. What a person truly needs is a goal.

"I've found my ideal chair. Tried to be careful, but… it was too late."

I'd always thought I was content as I was, but maybe it was time I started to pump some iron too. I'd relied far too heavily on my innate talent thus far. And if I was changing, I'd do it right. An internal shift simply wouldn't cut it. I'd acquire a new screw, becoming something that could be everything *and* nothing—a perfect imitation, right down to the last detail. A machine in human skin.

Heh. Just you wait, you little shit.

／ Hide and Self.end

/ 3.5 / self(R)2

▪▪▪

After requesting the devil in the basement to deliver my message, I kept watch over the bus stop for a few hours. Once Makina had departed, I slowly made my way to the housing complex, stepping into the now-empty Room 303.

Strangely, the space that had once been a kitchen was entirely drenched in crimson. Through the window, on the narrow balcony, I could see the phantom of a young Makina, from her time as a god, curled up and crying for help.

"...Ah."

That same red that had felt so mournful three years ago now shimmered to me with the glow of celebration. How radiant. How excruciating.

"Someone's on fire over there," she had said.

But what was truly aflame was my own beloved sister.

"Sorry, Makina. But my victory was decided the moment you set foot here."

I sat down in the kitchen, pressing the stolen knife against my throat. On the very edge of the precipice, the flashbacks from three years ago returned: *"You should learn from your sister." "C'mon, Shinya, you're copying your sis too much!" "No. No, no, she's the fake! That method is mine! She's the imitation, please listen, I'm the real one!"*

"Haa..."

The echoes of my past screams reverberated, but here, they ceased. My own strategies may not succeed, yet this method promised a definitive conclusion. Makina herself had, after all, shown me: to erase someone from this world, one needed only to sacrifice oneself. At last, I could vanquish the devil.

My palm fused to the hilt. No fear—not of pain, nor of severance. This was not an end, merely a means. Indeed, liberation was the first sensation.

The room remained steeped in endless red.

In my final moments, I had reclaimed who I was.

Well, then... So long, Shinya.

3. formal hunt.

My interest lies not in shortening time,
nor do I derive any thrill from rushing past what lies ahead.

For me,
uninterrupted motion is the one and only testament of speed.

formal hunt.

1 / Two Years Ago (Winter 2003)

My brother doesn't know we come from a family of murderers. And the truth is, I'm also one myself.

▪▪▪

Shikura—a city in the northernmost part of C Prefecture, slightly east of the centre. It was one of those places that was awkwardly accessible, two hours from the city by express train, yet somehow still felt isolated.

The population hovered around 150,000, with no notable tourist attractions. Five kilometres beyond the station, mountains and fields stretched out endlessly—your typical provincial town.

And within this provincial town, slightly north of its centre, lay Block 2 of Shikura Hills. It was a quiet residential district, so serene it was hard to describe otherwise. The roads were wide, and the town's layout was spacious—land was the one thing they had in abundance. But the buildings lacked any charm whatsoever. Most were over a decade old, rows of cookie-cutter two-storey houses that looked as though they'd been copy-pasted into existence. Apartments were in short supply, partly because so few young people bothered renting there, and families gravitated toward the more accommodating estates in Nouzu.

Then there was my street, Shikura Hills Block 2, 4. It sat on the fringes, where you could catch a faint whiff of class disparity. Not the affluent edge, but the lower one—a cluster of middle-class homeowners who were clearly barely scraping by.

This was where I lived. The same quiet, dull neighbourhood as Ishizue Arika. A place where, within a five-minute bike ride, you wouldn't find a single café, convenience store, or bookstore.

▪▪▪

Autumn mornings were pleasant. Time seemed to drift by, slow and elegant.

"Oi, Tomori! We gotta leave soon!"

"Sorry, I'm still eating! Go ahead without me, bro!"

I acted like I was eating breakfast so he would leave before me.

The truth was, walking to school together mortified me, though owning up to that would've been even worse. So, a petty fib, a bit of stopgap acting.

"Alright. I'm heading out, then. Try waking up earlier tomorrow, okay? And cut the late nights down to, like, three a week."

My brother, blunt but trusting, left without a second thought. Stuck with my own lie, I sipped at some coffee I didn't even like just to kill time.

Tomori—that name was one of my few selling points. It was incredibly easy to remember. Not quite on the level of Hanako or Ryouko, but I took pride in its simplicity and the ease with which it flowed from the pen. Teachers would take one look at my name on the sheet and instantly remark, "I've never seen a name so efficient, so utterly devoid of character," which, yeah, I guess wasn't the compliment they thought it was.

My brother, out of familial affection, would shrug and say, "Weird name. But at least you're cute." Or at least, back when I was in elementary school. When I asked him about it recently, he mulled it over for a solid two minutes before finally declaring, "Sounds like a cross between a Japanese doll and a bunny. Yeah, you pull it off." What kind of bizarre creature he was picturing, I had no idea.

"A Japanese doll and a bunny, huh? Like a fox? Honestly, I can't tell if I should be proud of my long black hair, or if it's already gone out of style..."

Whatever. I forced down the rest of the coffee and stood. It was time for school.

"Wait, Tomori. Come home early today. Your father wants to talk."

"Mm. Sure, but about what?"

"The usual. Just checking if you've been a good girl."

Mom smiled sweetly.

The usual, huh? Yeah, she was just as much of a born sicko. Guess it'd be another family meeting when I got back. *Ugh. So tedious. God, I wish they'd just hurry up and kick the bucket already.*

"I'm off! Be back by seven!"

I bounded out the front door with forced cheer. The clock was just shy of eight, and I was already running late. I walked the path I'd grown accustomed to over the past year, casting the occasional glance back.

Autumn mornings on the way to school were simply glorious. The air carried a faint chill, yet it was swaddled in warm hues nonetheless. The shortening days, each one drawing ever closer to winter, all felt tender to someone like me, a creature of the shadows.

It was October 2002.

The world around me suddenly grew noisy. For the first time in my ten-odd years of existence, I caught myself thinking, "Hold on… is something big happening?" My chest fluttered with anticipation. Not that I possessed anything grand enough to actually tremble over; my expectations remained perfectly pristine in that regard.

I took a sudden deep breath, swallowing the scent of autumn.

The air felt sluggish, like a passing interlude.

People, the city, even the passage of time itself lulled into a languid crawl. Tranquil, if you were to sugarcoat it. Pathetically unguarded, if you asked me. And for some reason, I found it utterly delightful.

I hummed under my breath, resting my palm against my restless, fluttering heart. The cause of this strange trembling was undoubtedly the fact that I'd broken into a run.

For about the past half month, I'd been undergoing a gradual transformation, and Shikura Hills was brimming with oddities.

Closest to home was our school's infamous slugger.

Shikura City boasted two phenoms on the diamond, so absurdly monstrous that even rival players could only grit their teeth and concede they were freaks. One of them was our cleanup hitter. This guy was the sorta batter who put in absolutely no effort, yet sent balls flying with a constant crack. His hits were so jaw-dropping that whole packs of baseball-illiterate chicks turned up just to watch him bat.

But our team never made it too far. This season, they bombed out in the third round.

Why? Because the heavens were stingy, apparently: every time this cleanup hitter smashed a home run, he'd puke. I'd heard of irritable bowel syndrome, but a slugger who puked after a perfect swing? That was new.

He'd hurled about ten times this season before finally passing out mid-game. And with their nuclear weapon down, our team crumpled instantly. Their opponents in the third round, by the way, were the detestable Koala Hills High, boasting the other genius, a pitcher. Ah, another chapter in the storied feud between Shikura and the Koalas.

Anyway, that was how his final summer ended. The baseball team and the teachers were devastated. The slugger himself, though, seemed unconcerned, tossing off, "That's the game for you. You win some, you lose some." He seemed to have no competitive drive whatsoever, turning down every offer the recruiters threw at him. Clearly had no intention to go pro either.

That kind of detachment was, in a way, enviable. Still, watching him at the plate—his stance like a samurai unsheathing his sword—he'd actually become one of my favourite upperclassmen. Someday, I'd like to face him.

Then there was the gossip. Agonist Disorder, commonly known as Possession, was rumoured to have found its way into this town.

This particular individual wasn't a Shikura native; he was a man apprehended in the southernmost city of C Prefecture. Word was, he'd escaped custody during transport and was now evading the police on his way northward. But honestly, that sort of news was neither novel nor particularly compelling. They called him a vampiric serial killer, but our school had far more unsettling tales—like the student council president straight out of a manga, or the devil with two right hands. And no, those weren't campfire tales; they were very much the real thing.

The fugitive Possessed was a man with an old-fashioned name: Hinomori Shuusei. Everyone was making a fuss about him being Shikura City's first Possessed, but the truth was that minor cases had started appearing long ago. It just wasn't the sort of news that'd turn heads, so no one really talked about it.

The whole thing had faded into obscurity, but about two years ago, a girl in Nouzu was reported to be a new case. It was an incident where her bullied younger brother murdered their parents and tried to kill her too, before she escaped by jumping off a third-floor balcony. However, she was diagnosed with Agonist Disorder soon after and sent to the hospital.

Turns out, she hadn't realised she was Possessed herself. She'd had her right arm, broken by her brother, tended to in the ambulance, and a subsequent blood test immediately came back positive. Sorry to them, but it was just so...

"So pathetic. I would have—"

—done it better.

The only reason I remembered this incident that should've vanished from my memories forever ago was because the fate of that Hisaori-whoever-she-was gave me a new creed to live by.

Test your limits, she seemed to say.

For a long, long time, my own shackles had smouldered, but she had finally broken them.

In that sense, perhaps that was the moment I, too, was infected with this illness.

They say Agonist Disorder doesn't spread from the carriers themselves, but since the devil is in the picture, the contagion of ideas seems infinitely more plausible than microbes on the wind.

Since then, I started having migraines regularly. The throbbing pulse—*thump, thump*—came across as a summons: *Test yourself. Challenge yourself.*

But I was a person of few talents, so I only ended up wasting my time without any idea where to even start.

I only noticed the real changes much later, specifically this past spring. Last year's physical made me raise an eyebrow, but this year was the final nail in the coffin.

The Possessed, it's said, fall into two categories: those who grow additional appendages and those whose internal composition undergo alteration. I had no extra

claws or mouths, so you'd assume that'd make me the latter type. But my insides showed no visible change either. No specific mutations manifested whatsoever.

Yet that was precisely my symptom: alongside my body's maturation, my physical abilities crept higher and higher, blowing past human limits. An obvious outcome perhaps, but in my case, the standard human threshold had been elevated considerably.

There was nothing flashy or spectacular about it, but the comprehensive enhancement of my human functions—that was my affliction.

There was no cure, but then again, it wasn't like I'd ever need one. If I just kept my mouth shut, no one would ever discover my secret. They claim the Possessed are destined for ruin, but this? This felt good. I wasn't causing anyone trouble, and I was genuinely enjoying myself, day by day, as I delved deeper into this peculiar madness.

◇

School ended, the sun set, and my favourite time of the day arrived.

Run. Run. Run. Run.

Another day where my restless pulse drives me forward, unable to stop.

Occasionally, I glanced back.

I had no destination.

At first, I'd been completely adrift. Just running for the sheer joy of it felt utterly inhuman. Humans required a reason: rushing somewhere, chasing a record, proving their worth, giving reason to their lives. Without some kind of meaning, a person couldn't run without anything to gain.

But I had none of that. In fact, all those tangled reasons would only trip me up. Lately, my old self, clinging to such purposes, seemed downright foolish.

"...Huh. Am I okay?"

I quipped at my own uncharacteristic whining. Something felt off. Was this *really* okay? I mulled it over, but even so, I couldn't find any purpose in running.

"Whatever, it's more fun this way."

What other choice did I have?

It seemed the best option was to become a beast. Animals, I imagined, ran simply as a testament to their existence, without ever dwelling on the why. If that were the case, there was no need to worry. If I embraced that, I wouldn't have to feel guilty for my own meaninglessness.

So tonight, again, I mimicked the beasts.

Roof to roof. Wall to wall.

Like a monkey, like a leopard—moving with fluid precision.

A two-storey house? Cleared in three bounds: one, two, three! The streets weren't flat paths but a jungle, navigated in three dimensions. How exhilarating. The sludge in my mind sloughed away.

Autumn's the season of harvest.

I've always thought lawnmowers were cool.

I leapt off the seven-storey rooftop to the six-storey one below.

Ten metres of sprinting, two metres of jumping, with about a metre of freefall in between.

As I landed, I shuffled sideways, dissipating the impact. My slightly-too-long hair bothered me. I reverted to my childlike—no, mindless—state, reveling in this nightly dance through the air. My body moved like a phantom thief, effortlessly soaring across the city's rooftops.

This degree of motion was, of course, well within human range. Any competent high school track athlete could've pulled it off. All you needed were free limbs, a decent run-up, and to avoid drops over a metre. Oh, and the most crucial part: to believe in yourself.

That's all there was to it. In reality, a top-tier athlete, for instance, could ascend a ten-storey apartment building balcony by balcony with ease.

Such light work was on the level of urban showmanship, no different from street shows or daredevil stunts. Everyone's likely had a similar experience, right? Losing your keys as a kid and climbing in through a second-storey window—that's a common tale. Yet, what a child can accomplish, an adult often can no longer. How

utterly illogical. Our bodies grow stronger, our athletic abilities more than double, so why are we unable to do such things?

But the cause isn't physical; it's mental. *Walls aren't for climbing. You'll dirty your clothes. You'll hurt yourself if you fall.* Our capabilities are more than sufficient, yet such human reason makes us forget we're still animals.

Not that I blame them. Being human is awfully convenient, after all. I was the same until recently. Tomori just happened to have her physical abilities enhanced, and she realised what she could do. This had nothing to do with superiority, just the pure difference between actually doing it or not.

...Well. In my case, the Agonist Disorder factor came into play, so there was a bit of cheating involved. Killing the impact of a landing or racing soundlessly across a rooftop—that's cheating by human standards. At this level, I was practically the only one who could pull it off. Thanks to that, even though I behaved however I pleased, I'd never been caught or scolded.

"Okay, except for my brother noticing my late nights."

I bounded homeward in short hops, stealing glances behind me, sometimes up at the sky. Stopping meant plummeting to my death, so I let out a wistful sigh as I ran.

Yeah. This is why I love autumn.

Nothing beats the moon on nights like this.

◇

"I'm home... Oh, hey, you're back. Day off from work?"

I found my brother lounging in the living room.

Him being home when we had a family meeting was borderline impossible.

"Yeah, just felt like taking a break. What about you, Tomori? It's almost seven. Wait, don't tell me you joined a club."

"Oh, perish the thought! Yours truly indulged in a trifling three hours of karaoke, leveraging the ladies' discount, no less. Ah, the burdens of social obligation!"

Not that I give a damn about social obligation.

Frankly, if I really sang my heart out, I'd risk rupturing everyone's eardrums.

"Hm. .....Need some money?"

"How generous! But your thoughtfulness alone suffices. All I ask is that you deliver this neighbourhood circular to the house next door. Pretty please?"

I pinched my skirt's hem for theatrical effect.

Because right now, Father was holed up in his study, waiting on me like a time bomb. The longer I dallied, the nastier his fit was bound to get. And preferably, my brother would be far from home before the ordeal began.

"Sure, got it. Wait, this circular's from the Ishimori residence. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Probably a mix-up. You know how it is. Ishimori and Ishizue both start with Ishi. The neighbourhood association ladies aren't getting any younger."

"I mean, sure, but... botching names is kinda bad even for old folks."

Grumbling about the nuisance, my brother headed for the door.

I left my bag on the stairs and made my way toward the study where Father waited.

"Welcome back, Tomori. You followed my instructions. That makes your father very happy."

With an incredibly warm smile, Father gestured for me to sit.

The study had a skylight, and I found myself automatically tilting my head back to stare at the night sky through it. Here, Tomori fell silent. Just weathering Father's monologues drained me dry; forming human-like responses or even thinking before speaking felt utterly burdensome.

Honestly, why were human words so clumsy and impure? The fact that no one else ever questioned that was, to me, the real absurdity.

"This won't do. You've been staying out too late recently, and rather often at that. Your mother is worried. And I, as your father, can't condone such a lack of order in your routine."

He wore that same idealized paternal mask, so flawlessly composed it could almost make you swoon. He'd worn it the day Grandfather died too, placating me behind that façade.

I was five years old when Grandfather became the family burden.

A lifetime of cigarettes and alcohol had taken its toll, I suppose. He was completely bedridden, his lungs and heart hopelessly spent. His joints ached constantly, and during the worst spells, he'd let out these unbearable wails. Not that we could hear them upstairs, really; they were more like choked gasps.

But for Father and Mother? It must've been like an endless exam they couldn't pass. That summer, my brother and I were shipped off to Mother's hometown. Except I came back a day early, I don't even remember why. Probably something trivial—a TV show I wanted to catch, or maybe I'd just gotten sick of the countryside.

When I got home, I heard faint rustling from Grandfather's room. Curious, I peeked in to find him crumpled on the bed, writhing grotesquely.

Summer was tough for those with poor health, especially for the elderly whose strength had long ebbed away. I reported it to Father, who ordered me to ignore it. "It's nothing out of the ordinary. Leave him be," he said.

Yes, it was an order. "Your father's off today, so let's stay together," he said, clamping down on my shoulder.

I understood then what Father and Mother wanted.

—Or perhaps it was the way his fingers bore into my flesh—

What they expected from me.

—Or Mother's expressionless Noh mask of a face—

Anyway, once it was spelled out like that, I found myself agreeing that Grandfather was unnecessary, so I spent the night like that.

The next morning, Grandfather's bedroom contained a single, grotesque sculpture, haphazardly assembled with human limbs. If you had to give it a title, "SOMEONEHELPME" might be fitting.

Father and Mother's faces went pale, and they immediately called the hospital—though their actions, for all their frantic words, were very, very calm.

Yeah. My family were murderers. And so was I.

The only decent one in this house was my obnoxiously kind older brother, who had obediently stayed in the countryside, following every rule.

"Tomori, you're not keeping secrets, are you? *I'm* not hiding anything. So let's both strive to keep it that way, shall we?"

Ever since that day, he'd repeat this conversation in that gentle voice.

I just kept staring at the sky.

Father was confirming our complicity.

If three days passed without this ritual, he'd grow restless, summoning me to perform it again. The truth was, he probably didn't even want me going to school.

Weekends were the worst of it. Until high school, every day off ended right here, in this study.

"I'm so glad you've stayed a good girl, Tomori. Your mother nags, but she does understand you. She watches you closely because she loves you, you know?"

I watched the moon instead.

Mother was the keeper of our silence.

These subject-less conversations downright sickened me. But putting names to things would've made talk impossible, so what choice was there? In this house, words like 'grandfather', 'accident', or 'illness' were permanently banned.

But honestly?

"I know, Father. I know that you trust me. After all... we're... family."

What disgusted me wasn't that we'd let Grandfather die. It was that we kept digging it back up, over and over again.

These so-called family meetings, really just conspiratorial hushed talks, always concluded along the same unchanging lines. Thanks to them, I'd developed an odd appreciation for moon-viewing at a remarkably young age.

Stare at the moon too long, and you turn into a beast.

There's a famous story about that in our literature textbooks. In them, the beast was a tiger. But mine would be a fox. Yeah, that felt right. If I was already inhuman anyway, it would be easier, more comfortable, to embrace that.

◇

But lately, it felt like things had only gone downhill.

Silencing me would've been enough when I was still a child, but that's not nearly enough to stop an adult.

My parents must've realised it too. A five-year-old left to their own devices would've simply forgotten. But by constantly drilling it into me, they forced us to share an undeniable truth.

By elementary school, I'd become more aware; by middle school, I began wrestling with the conundrums of morality.

And the more I grew into a proper human, the deeper their paranoia festered.

Honestly, it was quite a bother. *They* dragged me into this. *They* raised me like this. And now *I* was the one being treated like a problem?

With no way of relieving my compounding stress, I started becoming resentful over the slightest things.

...So, the first time happened on the spur of the moment.

My brother had fallen in with bad company. I just wanted to give them a bit of a scare. Really. That's all.

◇

As autumn deepened, so did I, in more ways than one.

With my brother preoccupied with college entrance exams and both school and home growing duller by the day, I hurled myself even deeper into my nightly escapades.

Thump Thump Thump Thump
Run. Run. Run. Run.

Urged on by that persistent pulse, I kept running. Every now and then, I'd steal a glance over my shoulder. Life as Tomori the human had its moments, but running—that was pure joy. Ah, but… when had running become my only happiness?

"Tomori, be a good girl."

Complacency breeds carelessness.

Leaving an hour early had been a mistake. I took a random turn at an intersection I usually sprinted straight through—just a whim.

The girl stood there, dumbstruck, staring in wonder at the shadow darting across rooftops.

"Father's always watching you, Tomori."

A shiver ran down my spine. *Ah, of course.* For some reason, I felt as though I'd known this would happen. *Oh, well.*

Anyway, I'd finally been caught in the act.

It ended in one strike. I hid her body in the woods. No forethought—just instinct, like catching a dropped chopstick. A quick snap of the neck. What else was I supposed to do? This was what I was, after all.

If I'd stopped to think, I might've been able to conjure up some humane justification for killing her. But this wasn't my first time, so I didn't feel all too guilty.

Ah, but still. That chill when she spotted me? I could get addicted to that.

"Our family are partners, remember?"

Fads define entertainment. The same thrill from yesterday often feels stale today.

It was fun, but they overdid it a little. When I think about it, it's outdated, really…

And thus, novelty fades. No form of amusement can stay at the top forever. Even if the entertainment itself remains unchanged, the consumer's feelings evolve. It

faithfully holds to its nature, but fickle creatures like us, who constantly change, cannot appreciate its loyalty.

"About that day—"

Joy evolves.
What delighted me at first?
What delights me now?

"About that day—"

I can't stand it. I want to erase every witness, one after another.

The perfect motivation to keep running. Animals were hunters by nature, and this hunt, it fit me.

Ideally, I wouldn't discriminate—men, women, adults, children. But females over males. Children over adults. That was more to my liking. It allowed me to truly feel it, the consumption of a life. Elderly prey was flavourless. Brawny men couldn't give me any thrill, even when they were cornered.

Yeah. That's what living is—raw and desperate. I can't ask for a more exhilarating hunt for a beast such as me.

"Keep quiet. Forever."

That's right.
Hurry up and find me.
Hurry up and become my prey.
I glance back sometimes. Killing one brings relief, but after three days, the itch crawls back. I long for another witness. It's almost like...

"Tomori, you're not keeping secrets, are you?"

He and I are alike, down to the bone.

My brother doesn't know we come from a family of murderers. And the truth is, I'm also one myself.

But Mother and Father aren't fools. They know I'm hiding something. I recognize that anxious look in their eyes. We're the same, after all. It's the same expression I wear after seven days without a hunt.

So, it's only a matter of time before they find out. And once they do, the family meetings will end. Then, it'll be a matter of kill or be killed.

...Wait. Come to think of it, why have I even left them alive?

◇

Winter came, and with it, the new year.

Autumn's end left me feeling desolate, and the relationship with my parents seemed utterly beyond repair. Ah, well. As long as I had my brother, that was enough.

"Guess it's time for hibernation. Better late than never."

I set my sights on my parents. But to go straight for them would make my motives too obvious, so I needed several decoys.

Might as well make it fun.

I studied the terrain meticulously, concealed my identity carefully, and bared my fangs all at once.

Luckily, that wanted serial killer—what's-his-name—was still at large. The more of a ruckus I created, the more smoke I'd have to hide behind. Hide a corpse among corpses. Hide a killer among killers. *Perfect.* So, one by one, I picked off the women and children of Shikura Hills Block 2—my preferred prey.

The preparations, initiated at the turn of the year, were finalized by February. Outside, the cold gnawed so viciously it felt like snow.

"Yeah, this'll do."

It was a night of faint, grating bone.

For no particular reason, I decided tonight would be the night of the slaughter.

▪▪▪

February 14, 2003. 12:00 AM.

A series of murders and assaults erupted across Block 2 of Shikura Hills.

Neighbours reported screams from Ishizue Masamichi's residence, prompting two patrolling officers to investigate. Upon arrival, they discovered a homicide next door at the Yamanashi household.

Authorities attributed the killings to Hinomori Shuusei (28, male), a wanted fugitive already under a nationwide arrest warrant. The case was subsequently delegated to Special Investigations Unit 4.

For the safety of nearby residents, an evacuation advisory was issued for the entirety of Shikura Hills Block 2. Once the area was cleared, at approximately 12:50 AM, law enforcement surrounded the Ishizue residence, where the suspect had barricaded themselves.

Supervision fell to Inspector Touma Mato, who had been transferred from Central HQ's Public Security Division just that day. By 1:07 AM, the situation was neutralized, successfully leading to the rescue of an Agonist Disorder patient in a dissociative state. Meanwhile, Ishizue Arika (18, male), who lost his left arm in the bloodshed, was secured by Inspector Touma. The officer's swift actions saved the victim's life.

The estimated time of death for all casualties fell between 12:00 AM and 12:30 AM, after which the suspect reportedly returned to the Ishizue residence. The encirclement was completed at 12:50 AM, and Inspector Touma Mato secured the suspect.

Though the Ishizue, Yamanashi, Ishimori, and Kizaki residences sustained property damage, no fatalities occurred after the perimeter was established.

Following the resolution of the incident, one individual was reported missing. This report was formally acknowledged due to discrepancies between the confirmed survivor and casualty counts when cross-checked against the official residential registry. The case was subsequently transferred to the Community Safety Bureau for further investigation.

2 / Epilogue: Part 1 (Winter 2004)

▪▪▪

"Wait, surveillance? Not tailing? I didn't know you were good at that stuff, Arika."

My skill was the least of the considerations here. When Ms. Mato gave an order, you obeyed.

Winter 2004, the year's end. Fresh out of Origa Memorial Hospital, freshly acquainted with Karyou Kaie, and now freshly roped into this half-assed watchdog gig against my will.

◇

The view from the used van's window was a bleak, monochromatic world.

Snow had been falling since morning, even carrying past noon, blanketing the deserted office district in white desolation.

It was 3 PM. No pedestrians on the overpass. No cars on the road. The towering office buildings stood dark, their lights off, as if already closed for the day.

The vibe screamed post-apocalyptic—no rubble, but you could easily mistake it for a decade after humanity's extinction. A frozen graveyard where time travelers in spacesuits might land, searching for clues to mankind's demise beneath the white shroud. And then—

"Senpai! The kerosene's only gonna last another hour! Shouldn't we, like, huddle for warmth or something?!"

The twenty-year-old monkey riding shotgun couldn't care less. Hell, she was currently thrashing inside the van. Not to be outdone by the desolate scene outside, our interior was equally chaotic in its own survivalist way.

The interior showed a decade of hard use, grubby fabric peeling, and windows barely visible through layers of stickers and grime-stained curtains. The back seats had

been ripped out to make room for a roaring oil stove, glowing red, complete with the mandatory kettle boiling water.

…Let me rephrase. This wasn't survival. This was a full-blown homeless shelter.

"It's cold as hell. How the fuck did I end up stuck here with this crew today, anyway? Hey, Kirisu, weren't you supposed to go home?"

"You know I'm too broke for that shit, man. Debt collectors hit me yesterday. Took everything, even my jacket. Hey, Tsuranui, you got any oversized jumpers lying around? Hand 'em over."

"Old clothes? Hmm, I tossed most of last year's, but I've still got a few unworn ones lying around. Not that they'd fit you, Kirisu."

"I'll pawn it. Doesn't matter. …Christ, you're sittin' on cash, huh? Your credit card ain't maxed yet? Watch yourself. Now gimme."

"No way! That's what you get for slacking off! Go freeze to death outside your igloo, Kirisu! And you're ruining the vibe! This is my big chance for some alone time with Senpai! Like hitting the jackpot at the last second! Now, take the hint and scram, 'kay? Right, Arika-senpai?"

"Yeah, seriously. Kirisu, coffee. And close the curtains a little more once you're done ventilating the place. Fourth floor just went dark."

"Wait, really? Shit, is our mark moving? If we lose 'em, Ms. Mato's cuttin' our allowances again. Starving sucks, but freezing's even worse. Here."

"Thanks. Man, how did I end up stuck here with this crew today, anyway?"

I tossed out the complaint for the seventh time that shift.

"For real. Totally mind-boggling, isn't it? Oh, but I provided the van and stove, so maybe a little gratitude is in order from you boys."

Even the year's nastiest cold snap couldn't freeze Tsuranui's sunshine demeanor. Sipping on cavity-inducing milk tea, Shikura's most chronically bored resident seemed to exist purely to amuse the rest of us.

"By the way, the person you're watching… they're Possessed, aren't they?"

"Huh? Arika didn't tell you?"

"Nope! He woke me at 6 AM, going, 'Yo, that van you got scammed into last time—still got it?' Then he strong-armed me into driving here, even though it's basically the dorm's communal storage idol now. Zero context."

"Damn, that's rough. For once, I actually feel bad for you, Tsuranui. And for me too, for that matter. He only dragged me along 'cause you refused to leave."

"Huh? What does me staying here have to do with you coming along?"

"Well, that's just in case… wait, you seriously don't get it?"

"Uhh… A-Arika-senpai's cruel mind games? You know, like, more people means a smaller cut per person?"

"You, madam, are beyond sympathy. In a way, you give Arika a run for his money. So, what's the deal, Arika? The one on the fourth floor—they're the Possessed we're after?"

"According to Kaie, yeah. …Wait, shit. The front seats are visible from their window. Scoot over—I'm moving to the back."

I moved from the passenger seat to the back, and the three of us crammed together, our heads nearly knocking. Even with the seats ripped out, the van was claustrophobic as hell.

"By the way, Senpai, which Possessed are we on the lookout for? Any recent drama?"

"Which Possessed? Do you just go around collecting gossip or something? Our illegal squatter hasn't done anything crazy, nor are they a recent case. Just your run-of-the-mill mugger, one victim a month. Apparently been around for quite a while. The cops are treating it as regular assault, not devil shit."

"A mugger? Like, purse-snatching kinda deal?"

"Yep. Your run-of-the-mill, money-grubbing pickpocket. Though, uh, the survival rate for their victims is about fifty-fifty."

"ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU CALL A SERIAL KILLER?!"

"The hell're you yelling at *me* for? Besides, they don't seem like the kind of brute you'd call a serial killer. All their targets are men in their thirties, for one."

"Wait. So… they don't target women?"

Bingo. This Possessed had offed witnesses during their muggings, but if the witness happened to be female, they'd just walk away unscathed. They seemed to pride themself on being some chivalrous gentleman who wouldn't lay a finger on a lady.

"Huh. What an odd Possessed. Anyway, now that we've got that outta the way, wanna eat?"

"....."

I'd been a fool for taking her seriously.

Tsuranui started busily unpacking her lunchbox—no, a tiered monstrosity, the kind that promised an abundance of ingredients, far more than one container could hold. And it boasted four layers. She ceremoniously unveiled each one, her bandaged fingers both painful-looking and strangely beautiful.

And so. First, a box filled with burnt karaage. Next, a box filled with burnt tamagoyaki. Then, a box filled with burnt spring rolls. And finally, a box filled with burnt white rice. Four varieties of culinary arson. The tiered lunchbox's purpose was utterly lost.

"The hell is this? You call this cooking?"

"What else would it be? Oh, and we're splitting the cost for the ingredients, just so you know."

She beamed, offering me a piece of the abyss.

I'm gonna be murdered. Not by the Possessed skulking outside, who, even with the engine off, might notice this suspiciously parked van and come to silence us. Not by Kaie, who was probably cackling as he garnished my wages and left me to starve. Not even by Ms. Mato, who'd been in a foul mood lately and looked just about ready to shoot anyone. No, *this* idiot would be the one to finish me off first.

"Tsuranui, can I have some too?"

"Go ahead! You're an uninvited guest, Kirisu, but I made plenty extra, so you can have some. Hehe, but don't go hoggin' it just 'cuz it's tasty!"

"I ain't eating this shit. Whoa?! Arika, get a load of this! The karaage's stuffed with hamburg steak!"

What kind of sorcery—

"Fufufu… Chicken's pricey, so I used some expired hamburger patties I dug out of the van. Reverse-engineering, baby! Aw shucks, I'm such an ingenious gal! Here, Senpai, dig in!"

Her grin was unhinged. She was clearly not in her right mind. This van was probably filled with carbon dioxide already, wasn't it?

"Later. Not hungry right now. But… yeah, I guess it's *technically* food. Kirisu's having it, so it can't be *that* bad."

"Damn right I am. Back home, we used to eat bamboo. Bamboo, dude. Chopped thin, grilled with soy sauce."

"Wow, bamboo? Huh, I guess that sorta makes sense since bamboo shoots *are* edible. You've got some wild customs at your place, Kirisu. But why bring that up now? That's got nothing to do with our conversation!"

Oh, it's got everything to do with it, Tsuranui.

◇

"Senpai, what's your take on feminists?"

In the languid haze after our meal, Tsuranui suddenly dropped the question with an uncharacteristically sober tone.

"I'm talking about that Possessed on the fourth floor. If they only go after men, doesn't that mean they're sympathetic toward women? How'd you interpret that? Oh, and Kirisu-senpai, your opinion doesn't count. You're just some shitty womanizer."

"Shut the hell up. Beats bein' a guy who swings that way, anyway. Anyway, Tsuranui, feminists stand for gender equality. Someone who exclusively targets men is the polar opposite of that, no? That's discrimination, plain and simple."

"Oh. Right. So, the Possessed we're watching… does that mean, conversely, they look down on women, Senpai?"

"Hmm… If they're sparing only female witnesses, 'looking down on' isn't quite right, is it? But feminist might actually be closer to the mark. Kirisu's definition of gender equality is outdated. Modern feminism has largely shifted to something more like the elevation of women's authority."

"Elevation of authority? Like… respect? Or worship?"

"Yeah. Feminist in the colloquial sense, I guess. One thing's for sure: they're definitely gentle with women."

Though, I didn't know if they chose not to target women, or simply couldn't. Worship, after all, is directed at something one holds in awe.

"Huh. A gallant adversary, then. By the way, do *you* feel the same, Senpai?"

"Never thought about it, but being gentle toward someone's pretty easy, don't you think? I think being harsh on people is much more respectable. As long as it's within reason, of course."

It was a conviction bound to earn resentment, making it no different from a one-on-one duel. If sincerity meant never pulling one's punches, then this, too, could be called a relationship of equals.

"*Hmm.* So, Arika-senpai, you must've been really harsh with your baby sis, huh?"

"What? Hold on. Why're we talking about my sister?"

"Well, 'cuz you do have one? You were totally trying to hide her from us, weren't you?"

That 'weren't you' carried a whiff of resentment, maybe even a hint of spite. I hadn't intentionally concealed her, but it was true I'd rather they didn't know. So it felt a little awkward being called out.

"People pick up a sister or two if they live long enough. Ain't that right, Kirisu?"

"Hell nah. Don't lump me in with you siblings. You're spoiled, Arika. With a sister that hot, your life must be nothing but roses."

Suddenly, it was two against one! And generally speaking, roses are red. Meaning, the colour of blood. Damn it, who asked you to get all poetic on me?

"—Wait a sec. How the hell do you even *know* that?!"

"*Ugh.* Senpai, you just owned up to the 'hot' part without even denying it!"

"Pure coincidence, I swear! I just happened to bump into someone who went to middle school with her, and they flashed me a photo. No joke, introduce us, yeah? She's bang-on my type."

"……"

These idiots had absolutely no idea. Not a microscopic clue what kind of creature she truly was. Like clueless hatchlings screeching for scraps, the pair of imbeciles, utterly ignorant of the truth, chirped for an explanation.

"Listen, you two. For your own good, stay the hell away from her. Remember that incident in Shikura Hills two years ago? She was the culprit."

"What?" they both blurted out, heads canting in unison.

Naturally. There wasn't a soul in Shikura City who didn't know of that cataclysm.

It was a night where a devil ran amok, when a terminal-stage Agonist Disorder patient went berserk, unleashing indiscriminate carnage. Thirty houses were impacted.

In barely an hour, the toll climbed to eleven dead, six in critical condition, and thirteen wounded—Shikura City's unprecedented, miraculous biohazard. Days later, the staff of Origa Memorial Hospital collectively shuddered, realising that a rampage from such a patient should've yielded a death toll far beyond mere double digits.

"Shikura Hills… two years ago… wait, wasn't that when your parents were…"

"Yeah. My place was her last stop. Well, 'stop' makes it sound like she was visiting—it was *her* house too. Maybe she just dropped by for a quick breather before the main event began."

Or perhaps she'd returned to tie up one final loose end before disappearing for good. I didn't want to even picture what was running through her mind, but that fleeting moment of calm became the spark that ignited an even bloodier conflict.

"So, Senpai… you were home the whole time? While the neighbourhood was, like, screaming? I heard there were evacuation orders, too."

"Nah. I was, uh… sound asleep."

I awkwardly averted my gaze.

"Ah, figures. She probably thought she could off you anytime, so she went off to finish her errands first. Impressive. Well, it's no surprise that your own sister knows you well."

Rude, yes, but painfully accurate, so I had no comeback. I was so incredibly dense, in fact, that I'd slept through my parents' murders, only snapping awake when the agonizing pain of my left arm being ripped off finally registered.

Still, being dense sometimes had its perks.

That night, I awoke to a dress-clad thing crouched atop my bed, my left arm gone, and the blinding glare of police floodlights sifting through the second floor windows. Immediately after, an explosion rocked the air. To put it mildly, it felt like I'd stumbled into the crossfire of a kaiju-versus-Ultraman battle. And somehow, even as I grasped the utter hell of it all, I didn't pass out. Give my thick skull some credit for that.

"So what was your sister like? The photos I saw made her look like some delicate French doll. Did she use a kitchen knife? A handsaw?"

Tsuranui's strength was her persistent questioning when a topic interested her. She couldn't stomach ghost stories, yet real-world gore fascinated her to no end. Her high school legend, dismantling a chicken while humming, was still talked about.

"Nah, didn't see the weapon. Didn't seem like she used anything to take off my left arm, though."

"Sh-She ripped it off bare-handed?!"

The image alone was vile. Nauseating, even. But that was marginally better, so I kept the truth to myself.

"Yeah. She never cared much for tools. Nunchaku, kendama... she'd mess around with them until they came back to bite her."

"...H-hoho, kendama, huh? Your sister... must have been quite the wild one!"

Tsuranui's face flushed as she made a disastrous comment. In Tsuranui-speak, 'wild' apparently translated to 'spirited and a bit mischievous.'

"A kendama's like a clacker. If you're bored outta your ass after class, go bug the dorm head. Bet she's got one."

"Got it! Asking ASAP! Sorry for my ignorance!"

Tsuranui scratched her cheek, looking embarrassed, perhaps unfamiliar with common folk games. It was a slight difference in childhood experiences, but the utter

lack of malice behind it spoke volumes about her disarmingly wholesome frame of mind.

"Point is, she hated weapons. Word on the street says she hoarded blades and blunt objects, all sorts of dangerous weapons, but no. She was simply a quiet kid."

"But she was Possessed, right? You didn't notice until then?"

"Hers was what you'd call an internal mutation. Most Possessed manifest enhanced physical traits alongside their mutation, but what she had was optimized solely for bodily reinforcement. With that kind, no one notices until the terminal stage hits."

Besides, I hadn't given much of a shit.

"Was your sister… a good person?"

"She was a child, in every sense of the word. Probably my parents' pride and joy. They really seemed to dote on her."

"And you, Senpai? Did you cherish her?"

"If not hurting her counts as affection, then sure."

"But, Senpai, she really hated you, didn't she?"

"Sure did. No clue why, though. Literally no memory of it."

Tsuranui's offhand remark, in that instant, struck me as the greatest enigma. I had no memory of ever stepping on a landmine that would turn her into a fucked-up girl harbouring thoughts like, "Big brother, I just can't wait to kill you!" So then, was the cause environmental? I honestly didn't have a clue anymore. Most likely… Something, I was certain, had festered within since the very beginning.

"Shozai, you in there?"

Perfect timing—an interruption.

Two soft raps against the van door. Standing outside was none other than Ms. Touma Mato, our illustrious big sister.

She stood there in her razor-sharp suit, the twin Berettas holstered at her hips screaming professional hazard. And she had company; a pair of plainclothes detectives lurked a few paces back.

"Hey. Congrats."

"...Good work. Where's the target?"

"That building. Oh, want us inside?"

"Nah, I'll be right back. Get my coffee ready."

She gave a lazy wave and sauntered off, as if she were just taking out the trash. The falling snow seemed to engulf her as she disappeared into the office building.

The accompanying plainclothes detectives stayed put at the entrance—if things turned ugly, they'd only slow her down.

"Ugh, Ms. Mato's such a baddie. So sleek! If I were a woman, I'd be head over heels for her!"

Tsuranui Mihaya drummed her fists against the passenger seat like an overexcited puppy.

"....."

Just to be clear: Tsuranui is, biologically, undeniably female.

"Don't give me that look. You get her point, don't you? Can you even picture Sis Touma as a guy?"

"Not at all. If that were the case, I'd rather be the one to change gender."

"Exactly. So, Arika, did Ms. Mato brief you on the Possessed in there?"

If by some chance she botched the job, we'd be the ones catching hell. Kirisu probably wanted to assess whether running was still on the table, considering Tsuranui was tagging along.

"Relax. She said it's the 'most unlucky' Possessed she's seen. 'One arm is enough for this' were her exact words."

Soon after, the sound of gunfire shattered the silence of the deserted city.

From within the building came the chaotic fracas of resistance.

Ms. Mato's violence, however, was strangely rhythmic and utterly unfazed. *Bang, bang. Crunch. Bang.* Honestly, I shouldn't be this used to it.

The fact that I could tell she was overwhelmingly dominant just by the sound alone was kind of messed up.

"...Damn. She's really something, huh."

"Yeah. 'Most unlucky' my ass. Once Ms. Mato sets her sights on a target, luck's the last thing they've got. Even my sister would've gotten away if not for her."

"Huh?" Two heads tilted in unison again.

Right, neither of them knew the details about my sister, let alone her run-in with Ms. Mato.

"What do you mean?" they asked, shifting into question mode.

Truly, ignorance is bliss. Curiosity killed the cat, after all. And this, this is how misfortune spreads.

"What, you really wanna know? Fine. But don't blame me if you end up regretting it."

If they wanted to know so badly, I might as well lay it out. Besides, if they knew about her, then this story was necessary for their own safety.

"...It's a long story. One night, Ishizue Arika woke up to find himself just another victim in—"

The cold outside faintly echoed the chill of that night.

It was a night of faint, grating bone.

The tale of a blood-drenched harvest—and the life it reaped.

3 / Formal hunt.

February 2003.

The arrest at the Ishizue residence marked law enforcement's first successful rescue of an Agonist Disorder patient, and the inaugural step in Inspector Touma Mato's illustrious, and frequently extrajudicial, dossier.

The blockade of Shikura Hills Block 2 took twenty minutes to secure.

Forty officers were deployed; half were riot squad members originally dispatched for the fugitive Hinomori Shuusei, while the remainder were local patrolmen.

"We've got firearm authorization, but the numbers are thin. Looks like we'll have to make do with a human barricade. Right, broadcast this to all units: for this operation only, they're cleared to shoot. Tell the rookies to savour it. They'll never get another chance like this."

Japanese police officers don't usually carry guns on them. Though sidearms are inspected at the start and end of shifts, they are ordinarily stowed in vaults and strongly prohibited from being brought off-site. To even carry one requires exigent circumstances that necessitate deployment. And even then, such an allowance is an extreme exception in Japan.

But there's a further caveat. Even if a handgun carry order is issued, firing it is never sanctioned. A gun is a deterrent; actually utilizing it would only see a police officer demeaned for their foolishness. Whatever their reason may have been, any officer who fires their weapon is instantaneously derailed from their career trajectory.

Touma Mato, however, commanded the opposite. Barricades of cruisers and officers. If the suspect attempted to breach them, they were to pull the trigger without hesitation. This wasn't an arrest, after all. It was a hunt.

"Inspector Touma. Positions are set. Any adjustments?"

"Right. If we let them slip because of our negligence, it'll be through those three spots. If they don't use those routes, we can pursue. Any survivors inside?"

"We took a look from the garden; two corpses in the living room, presumed to be the Ishizues."

"The siblings?"

"No evacuees match their descriptions. Likely still inside."

"I see. Just a roll of the dice, then. Any activity on the second floor? Hand me the floor plan. ...*Tch.* Tight spaces. I'd be better off alone. You lot babysit the local officers. Everything's new to them; they'll need someone to take charge."

"Roger that. Minutes to entry?"

"One. Oh, and fetch my shotgun from my trunk. It's personal property, so keep it discreet."

Here, Mato, the Inspector, ceased to exist.

The delivered shotgun was the Benelli Super 90, lauded as the pinnacle of autoloaders. While it sacrificed the absolute dependability of a pump action, she'd delegated precision to her twin Berettas. For a solo entry, she judged the auto-loader's single-handed operation advantageous.

She had already transformed into a hunter. Tying back her long hair and changing into her tactical suit, she holstered her two familiar Berettas at her sides.

"Commencing operation. And ensure ambulances are staged. Don't route them to Shikura Police Hospital, though. D-Rank patients make fine souvenirs for Origa."

Cradling the draped shotgun in one hand, she strode forward, fitting the frozen night. The iron gate of the Ishizue residence let out a mournful creak.

◇

The dog's distant howl faded into flight.

.....Now then.

For the girl, none of this had gone as planned.

Within the house, thick with the scent of blood, she eased into the dress prepared for this very day.

Police sirens wailed in the distance—far too soon.

Why were the authorities responding so swiftly?

And why was the extent of the damage so widespread?

Her flawlessly arched brows furrowed into a dainty frown as she glided down the corridor.

Her parents' deaths were confirmed. They lay peacefully, as if sleeping, in the living room; for their final farewell, she had arranged them like affectionate lovers, hands clasped.

With footfalls light as drifting petals, she tiptoed up the staircase.

Her brother's room sat tucked away in the corner of the second floor. The growing clamor outside held no meaning for her. The sirens were encircling the Ishizue residence, but surely it was just some kind of misunderstanding.

After all, she could recall doing nothing that warranted that.

Without hesitation, she opened the door, locked it, and tugged the curtains shut. No one would bother them now. A solitary, tender smile touched her lips at the sound of his carefree snores.

And now—let us begin the delightful and savoury preservation. No reservations needed.

◇

The locked corner room buzzed with murmuring voices. Without a moment's pause, Touma Mato obliterated the wooden door with a shotgun blast.

"...?"

But the sight gave even *her* pause, leaving her uncertain how to proceed.

In the darkened room were a young man and a girl.

The girl's neck was—by the young man, his face contorted in a mix of anguish and fury. The girl, meanwhile, had her lips curled in a crescent-moon grin.

The expected target, Hinomori Shuusei, was nowhere to be seen.

By all appearances, the young man was the perpetrator, the girl his victim.

"Amazing... Brother's hand is still twitching inside my stomach..."

Mato's verdict was immediate: the pristine white girl was her prey.

She drew the Beretta from her left holster and fired at the girl's shoulder.

The hammer fell. The girl moved. Two sounds, near simultaneous.

The girl launched from the bed like a spark, the bullet gouging into the wall in vain, just as Mato's shotgun roared towards the ceiling.

"Eeeeek!"

Thump. Amidst the debris, a white dress fluttered to the floor, completely unscathed.

While the shooter lacked restraint, what her quarry lacked was the rules of man. The girl had redirected her midair trajectory from ceiling to wall. What fell was merely her dress, grazed by the shotgun's scattered wreckage.

"Ouch… How rude."

Brushing off fragments of wood, the girl rose.

Bang. Without warning, Mato's second shot ripped through her left shoulder, a crimson bloom staining the white lace.

"…Huh."

She lapped blood from her fingers, gazing at the armed woman dispassionately.

"How rude of you, auntie. Barging in uninvited like that is incredibly brusque, don't you think?"

She hurled the wooden shard in her hand at Mato's brow.

The third gunshot.

No, counts held no meaning anymore.

With that third pull of the trigger, the volume of bullets discharged doubled, mercilessly riddling the girl's body.

At this moment, the perceptions that bloomed between them were tragically at odds.

The girl had thrown the wooden shard with the intent to kill.

That shard, launched with a flick of her wrist, was instantly pulverized by Mato's bullet. In the same instant, six rounds perforated the girl's body.

Mato, just as relentless in her objective to silence the target, fired two, then three more shots, letting her shotgun drop to draw her second automatic pistol, unleashing a volley for approximately three seconds.

To the girl, Mato was merely a puppet to dismantle.

To Mato, however, the girl was just another Possessed.

Any other combatant would have recognized that the one before them was on an entirely different level.

But these two existed on such fundamentally different biological planes, with not an ounce of interest in mutual understanding.

In terms of both ability and mindset, they were the worst conceivable matchup.

And so, they clashed—never even considering that they were each other's ultimate nemesis until the moment their conflict was decided.

"Haaa!"

Even with nearly nine bullets lodged in her, the girl refused to fall. Only her white dress howled, spotted crimson.

"You bitch!"

More offended by the stains on her dress than her own wounds, the girl shrieked in irritation and lunged at Touma Mato.

A sweeping, powerful kick cleaved through the air.

Gunfire.

Splintering wood.

More gunfire.

The girl's attacks whizzed by, while the relentless 9mm lead found its mark again and again.

With each miss, the girl's ferocity escalated—a fifty-kilogram force, then a hundred, until even support beams shattered.

But despite unleashing that many bullets, despite wielding such brutal force, terrifyingly, there still hadn't been a single decisive blow.

"*...Tch.*"

A click of frustration—whose, it was impossible to tell, in the face of the unyielding situation.

The girl twirled her blood-stained dress.

Mato dropped her empty pistols to the floor.

A split second of silence. As the girl lunged, Mato kicked the discarded shotgun into the air with her toe. Point-blank buckshot detonated. Impossible. The girl moved with blinding, incredible speed, leaping sideways.

It was a mere graze. The scattered pellets barely clipped one of her arms, obliterating only the wall behind her.

That the survivor on the bed wasn't caught in the crossfire had to be either a show of concern from Mato or a stroke of astonishing luck.

The girl, concerned for her meal on the bed, bounded through the shattered wall and out of the building. Unfazed by the spray of viscera, she landed on the roof, immediately tearing a window frame loose.

She must have realised that bare hands wouldn't suffice. It seemed she intended to use anything at arm's reach as a weapon.

"Fucking brat. Shotgun won't cut it."

A shotgun's initial draw was too slow, too broad. At this range, evasion was too easy; a hit would require a masterful setup.

Mato discarded the shotgun and moved towards the blown-out wall, ramming fresh magazines into her two pistols. Only then did her gaze finally cut toward the one who needed saving.

"Sorry. I should have said this sooner, but I'm with the police. I'll handle her, so you stay put."

She vaulted onto the neighbouring roof, pistols still clutched in hand.

Mato had four spare magazines concealed on her—sixty rounds total, at fifteen per clip. Against a monster that remained intact despite taking dozens of bullets, it was a pathetically inadequate amount of firepower.

◇

As Touma Mato crashed into the second floor of the neighbouring house, she was greeted by an antique CD player.

"Heeere we go!"

She barely dodged the descending electronic device.

An adorable voice, paired with an iron fist capable of excavator-grade destruction. It was a sight that made you question your eyes. The edge of the CD player, roughly the size of a small sandbag, was embedded with the girl's five delicate fingers. No longer a household appliance, it was now a bludgeon of lethal quality.

"Round two!"

A slashing attack came at a terrifying speed and angle.

Mato sidestepped by a hair's breadth, her bullets shattering the CD player mid-air.

But it wasn't over. Beyond the explosively scattering electronics, the girl was already reaching for her next weapon.

There was no need to speculate any further. The girl's mutation was simple: the overwhelming performance of a humanoid beast.

Strength and explosive power that defied common sense.

Heat and reflexes that leapt beyond natural laws.

A body with durability and metabolic function that threatened reality itself.

Channeled through such capabilities, any object transmuted into a vicious, murderous weapon.

The sight that had previously made one question their eyes now transformed into a hellish spectacle that made one want to cover them.

From desks to books, from stationery to power outlets, dozens, hundreds of mundane objects became Mato's enemies.

An overwhelming array of armaments.

Against this whirlwind of improvised carnage, how could two pistols possibly compete with such a vast difference in violence?

An ordinary person's room was, for the girl, nothing less than a fertile armory. The girl was a murder blender. She would mercilessly massacre anything that entered this room with every piece of furniture available.

...Or at least, she *should* have.

"...Huh?"

Yet Touma Mato was weathering that storm.

She advanced unperturbed, sidestepping, kicking, firing, disarming, and systematically destroying every single weapon the girl laid her hands on.

To speak only of the facts: the girl's violence, no matter what she used as a weapon, had absolutely no effect on Touma Mato.

"You!"

The girl's scream was a raw blend of frustration and incomprehension.

This room was now useless, all its improvised armaments exhausted.

She burst through the wall of what seemed to be a young man's bedroom, gaining access to the next.

Excellent, more weapons. Touma Mato followed close behind. The girl snatched up a hefty travel case, pivoted around in a flash, and brought it up to intercept the incoming bullets.

Only her head truly mattered. Injuries to her torso or limbs were manageable as long as her skull remained intact, though she recognized that continued damage would impair her overall function. Still, it was preferable to death.

Mato's barrage was relentless, yet even against that, the girl held the upper hand.

This will surely kill her.

The moment Mato's two pistols clicked empty, the girl sent the case hurtling toward her. Her monstrous leg muscles propelled it like a line drive, streaking directly at Touma Mato's face.

It was an unavoidable strike, one that surpassed human limitations.

Mato was human, and no human could hope to evade it.

And so, she kicked it back with the exact same motion.

"Wha...?!"

The case ricocheted like a laser.

The girl, reacting with superhuman speed, leaped to the wall, granting Mato just enough time to finish reloading. By the time the girl realised, it was too late. The travel case had proved insufficient.

"Looks like I'll need something bigger, after all," the girl mused, reaching for the bed. But Touma Mato's precise shot punched through her wrist.

"—Tch!"

This armory was no longer enough; the girl plunged into yet another neighbouring house, tearing through walls. Mato followed, her breathing steady and controlled.

A blood-stained girl faced her hunter, who had yet to bear a single scratch.

While Mato possessed an overwhelming lead in terms of damage inflicted, it was crucial not to be misled.

The fight remained decisively in the girl's favour.

For Touma Mato was an ordinary human. A punch could put her down. A blade could end her. In stark contrast, her target was nigh immortal. As long as her head remained intact, she would continue to move. Aware of this, the girl ceaselessly protected her head with her right arm, wielding furniture solely with her left. It was contradictory—she was riddled with openings, yet they were utterly impossible to exploit.

"...Touma here. Alert Unit Two: Target heading toward Block 1. Prepare to engage. I can't handle this alone. If you don't hear from me in five minutes, assume I'm KIA and transfer command to Inspector Tamura."

Reloading as she spoke, she noticed she was down to her final magazine. If she emptied it, she would die. Before that happened, she had to neutralize her target.

"...Well, if I'm going to aim, it'll be for the head, I suppose."

Mato had long since recognized that it was the girl's only true vulnerability, her singular living part.

Which was precisely why she wouldn't aim for it. She would capture her alive.

That thing wasn't invincible, after all. The more bullets she took, the duller her movements grew. So in the end, ripping off her limbs would be enough to subdue her.

There was no need to fear her dying in the process. Why? Because the girl herself had provided the proof: as long as her head wasn't crushed, she wouldn't die.

◇

"W-Why… Why can't I—?!" she cried as she ran.

Not from pain, but from the electric jolt of realisation that she simply couldn't beat this woman.

"Here!"

In an unfamiliar kitchen in an unfamiliar house, she instantly grabbed a knife and lunged at the pursuing Touma Mato.

The blade flashed, slicing through a microwave and the wall itself, yet Mato simply stepped to the side, her expression unchanged.

Then, a searing pain in the girl's fingers.

Before the girl could even register that her hand had just been broken, the knife was already in Mato's possession.

"Wow, you're practically a magician!"

Her abnormal abilities granted her a strange mental detachment, giving her comment an almost idiotic sincerity. Such a sweet compliment had no place in a battle to the death.

Then again, that tenderness was not something Mato shared.

She plunged the stolen knife into the girl again and again. The crimson dress darkened, saturating into a near-black claret. *Crack.* The blade splintered against bone. Mato immediately discarded the useless hilt.

"Next, what about this—?!"

A volley of trident forks hurtled through the air. Two Mato let skim past, three she batted aside with the frame of her pistol, and then three of her bullets found their marks in rapid succession.

It was entirely futile.

No matter what the girl did, she was outmatched. Forks, frying pans, stoves, sectional sofas, even large plasma televisions—everything!

No matter the weapon, no matter the tactic, everything was reduced to splinters and scrap. Had Mato abandoned gunplay for close combat? She met the girl's brutal assaults and returned them with double the force, effortlessly toying with her. No, she was *butchering* her.

"Shit! Why does everything I pick up turn into dust?!"

It was the undeniable truth.

The gulf in experience was too vast. The gulf in knowledge was too vast.

If the girl was a superhuman, Mato was a master. Innate talent found itself being ground beneath a will of steel. A lifetime of consummated discipline and mental fortitude was now leveling the playing field.

"Ah… I'm losing, losingggggg, LOSINGGGG?!!!!"

And so, for the very first time, the girl fled.

Not to seek another weapon, but simply to escape this enemy.

If she did that, the fight would end.

For in a pure contest of raw speed, Touma Mato stood no chance.

There was no space for experience or mental fortitude here; the girl's legs were overwhelmingly superior.

The most Mato could do was traverse rooftops, while the girl effortlessly cleared entire houses. By any objective metric, the girl was the superior organism.

But it was humiliating.

Humiliating, humiliating, humiliating!

She should have won; she held an absolute advantage, yet every exchange had collapsed into failure. She was reduced to this wretched retreat.

Dropping from the roof, she landed hard on the asphalt. The impact jarred her. Too many bullets. Too much of her flesh carved away. She was utterly disoriented. Never before had she felt such exhaustion.

And so, she noticed the barricade too late.

"Fire."

A storm of bullets.

Before the driving fusillade of bullets could tear into her, the girl recoiled instinctively, springing up onto the nearest rooftop.

She glared down at the riot squad, simmering with resentment. She yearned to crush them, but her stamina was depleted. To annihilate that many, she knew, would be impossible without a little nutritional replenishment.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, the girl sprinted back home. She hurtled toward her own house, ripe with nutrients. A lone ballerina pirouetting through the deserted residential area at night. But her prized legs were battered, and she lacked the strength to leap to the second floor. She slinked, unnoticed, from the garden into the living room—

"Over here."

Mato stood there, waiting.

"....."

In that instant, had she lunged, she might have even won.

Mortally wounded though she was, the girl still had a chance. From Touma Mato's perspective, the odds were still 9:1 in the girl's favour.

But there was no mending a broken spirit.

The fear of losing had paralyzed her.

The girl had never known defeat, had been a stranger to setbacks, and unlike this woman, had never needed to fall back on effort or experience. The thought of cultivating such things never even crossed her mind.

Why would she? For a girl who held unwavering faith in her own inherent abilities, such necessities simply did not exist.

"I... I haven't lost yet!"

That arrogance disintegrated with defeat.

For the very first time, the girl paused to reflect. Her inherent omnipotence had, until now, obscured the sinful foolishness of her actions, but a new, almost murderous clarity now illuminated it.

"Oh? Wanna try this then?"

For some reason, Touma Mato casually tossed her gun toward the girl.

A beat of silence.

It dawned upon the girl that, despite trying every other conceivable weapon, just one had remained untouched. Drawn in by the obvious lure, she caught the gun, adjusting her grip with the hard-won caution born of past failures, and aimed with meticulous care.

Right, this tool was meant to be held with both hands. The string of defeats had sharpened her, driving her to seek maximum accuracy.

"You're finally using both hands."

Thunk.

The girl heard the sound of a knife burying itself in her throat.

"...Agghhhh."

She slowly pitched backward, crumpling onto her back.

Her vision flickered, consciousness fading.

At the very precipice of death, the girl at last perceived her true nature.

Indeed.

A being unneeded, unwanted, never truly born unless absolutely necessary. A mind that would not devise or contemplate without external impetus.

That was the root of the girl's defeat, the very self-preservation inherent in a lifeform prioritizing mere existence above all else.

But it no longer mattered. The protective shield of her complacency had shattered. Touma Mato, in that very moment, had inadvertently granted her the licence to evolve.

"Ha...agggghhhh..."

However, that was a matter for later.

For now, she was reduced to a newborn, barely clinging to life. Severed bloodlines. Though she still clung on, the insufficient blood flow to her brain had crippled her output to single digits.

In short, it was over. The first bout between the girl and Touma Mato had concluded with humanity's triumph.

"Actually, I've been thinking about it, and—"

Touma Mato gazed down at her defeated foe. She retrieved her favoured pistol and, for good measure, fired one last bullet into the girl's body. Then, with an almost dismissive air, murmured, "You know, you're fatally dreadful with tools."

With that casual remark, she revealed the biggest reason she had managed to stand toe-to-toe with such a monster.

4 / Epilogue: Part 2 (Winter 2004)

"—And that's about it."

Slurp. Slurp.

The van was steeped in heavy silence, punctuated only by sips of coffee and milk tea.

This was Ishizue Arika's firsthand account of that night, the sole survivor's tale. Kirisu and Tsuranui had apparently braced themselves for a gruesome tragedy, but from the moment Ms. Mato entered the narrative, they seemed to realise this was no ordinary horror story.

During the telling, Tsuranui had been gripping her seat, and now she was simply murmuring in awe, "Ms. Mato's amazing..."

"...You can tell how much work Sis Touma's put in just by looking at her body, but is she actually a doctor?"

"Dunno. She *does* wear a lab coat at the hospital, but that doesn't exactly prove anything. I'd like to believe she's just a therapist. Besides, if someone like her were one, I'd be fearing for this country's healthcare system right about now."

She seemed like she'd enjoy doing surgeries for no reason. Wouldn't hesitate to slice you open over a cold.

"You think so? I swear I heard her crap on anesthesia for being 'tacky.' Only a doctor would say something like that, wouldn't they?"

"Kirisu. She was joking that time, I'm sure of it."

She wasn't one to joke, but I had no choice but to believe it was. The alternative, that she meant it, was far too sadistic to entertain.

"Wait, hold on. So your sister survived and got taken to a hospital, right?"

"Yeah. I dunno if it's 'cause she hit her head, but she was in tatters after she passed out. The bleeding wouldn't stop, and only her brain, heart, and lungs were functioning properly."

It was probably the price of defying biology. After she collapsed, the time came to pay the bill she'd racked up.

"……*Mm,* that wasn't a very satisfying story."

"Duh, only a psycho would enjoy hearing all that. Was there any part of it that sounded normal to you?"

"No, I mean… then there's no reason for your sister to hate you, Senpai. Ms. Mato's the one who took her down. If anything, *you're* the one who should hate her. She killed your parents and ripped your arm off, no?"

"……"

The culprit who murdered my parents.

The monster who indiscriminately slaughtered our neighbours.

It was clear who the perpetrator was and who her victims were. As long as that fact remained, that thing should be denied any empathy, treated only as a monster beyond redemption.

"Nah. There's more to that story."

And with that, Ms. Mato made her grand re-entrance.

Outside the building, the Possessed was being escorted by the two detectives. They were clearly alive, though their limbs hung limp as if impaled by nails. Even the Tomato Tyrant had her merciful days, it seemed.

"Good work. Here's your drink, boss."

I handed her a convenience-store coffee, fifty yen pricier than our usual pick. She accepted the cup without stepping inside the van, leaving the door ajar. It made for a striking picture but left the rest of us shivering.

"More? So that wasn't where your sister's story ends?"

Tsuranui, undeterred by the cold, pressed on. Was she *really* that obsessed with gore?

"Obviously. You honestly believe Shozai's sister would hate him for no reason? So, interested in hearing the rest?"

"Of course!" Tsuranui eagerly leaned forward, her palms growing sweaty again. Mato took a deliberately bitter sip of her coffee and, with a hint of amusement, resumed the tale.

◇

That moment represented the single greatest misstep in Touma Mato's life.

She had averted her gaze from an enemy still very much alive. To anyone acquainted with her, it would have seemed as though she had simply paused, perhaps contemplating a new form of execution.

But with capture as her objective, finishing the target off was out of the question.

In a one-on-one, diverting attention from a fallen foe was, perhaps, an understandable lapse.

Furthermore, her fatigue had peaked.

Though not a flicker showed on her face, Touma Mato herself was on the verge of collapse, barely moments from dropping to her knees. She turned, exhaling slowly.

Who could possibly condemn her for that fleeting, almost imperceptible opening? If anything, the real crime was that the enemy chose to cash in on it.

"Getting old, aren't you, auntie?"

By the time she whipped around, it was too late.

The girl, eyes glowing with a feral intensity, stood before Touma Mato like a marionette yanked back to life—

"Wait, wha—?"

—only for Ishizue Arika, who had shrewdly crept up from behind, to bring a baseball bat crashing into her skull with a resounding crack.

◇

"Wait, *you* finished her off?!"

Kirisu's shock caused his coffee to erupt, striking my head like a fastball.

"Eh, heat of the moment."

Still, it would've been nice if he'd spared even an iota of thought for the fact that I would've been next in line if Mato had died.

But the outcome was clear: Mato survived, while my sister collapsed and was promptly hospitalized.

When she finally came to, the first thing out of her mouth was, "Just bring that idiot brother of mine here already." Reportedly, an anger symbol hovered over her speech bubble. It was, regrettably, the defining moment that demoted me from 'Big Bro' to 'that idiot brother.'

"...Yeah, no wonder she hates you, Senpai. Your most infuriating side was on full display, no holds barred."

"Oh? And what side of me is that, exactly?"

"The side of you that shows no mercy once you've made up your mind. It's not just a lack of hesitation; it's like your whole body just commits to execution."

Mato nodded, seemingly in agreement. From this perspective, the camaraderie between the girls was almost heartwarming. Though, I admit, such moments were exceptionally rare.

"The hell was I supposed to do? It was life or— Wait. Kirisu, move. I'm stepping out for a bit."

My phone buzzed with an incoming call.

Stepping outside, I found the city blanketed in grey.

The snow had turned to fine powder, silently burying the streets.

Not a soul was in sight, and the usual hum of the office district had fallen silent. It felt like a fitting prelude to the end of the world.

"Yeah, I'll go. I'll be there in about two hours. A bus? Don't be ridiculous. No bus is getting through these backroads in this snow. I'll walk, it's fine. See you later, then."

I hung up. My schedule, without warning, was now packed until midnight.

"Senpai? Who was that?"

Returning to the van, I retrieved my bag from the passenger seat, not the back.

"Got some stuff to take care of. Wrap things up here, will you? I'm off to another job."

"Are you meeting up with Kaie? C'mon, just do it tomorrow! Senpai, you were all hyped to rot under the kotatsu, grind some levels, maybe even cheat a bit, and pass out!"

"Well, he said he'd give me New Year's money."

"Ugh! Can't you see you're becoming a kept man, Senpai?!"

"....."

Cut me some slack. We had spent most of the day on stakeout. I longed for the cosy sofa in the basement, and besides, it was New Year's Eve. To be honest, I rarely got chances to receive gifts like this.

"Later. Thanks for the help, Tsuranui."

"Ugh, exploited again. Fine, but I get one last shot. What do you *really* think of your sister, Senpai?"

"....."

Damn these internet addicts, they're sharp.

"Doesn't really matter, does it? Right, Arika? Even if she's your sister, she's the one who killed your folks. At that point, she's basically a stranger, ain't she?"

Kirisu might see it that way, but no matter how many bodies she stacks, she's still family. That thread won't sever until one of us is gone for good.

If so, was that why she wanted to kill me? To sever our ties?

"Nothing special, really. If anything, I just pray she never leaves that hospital."

With that, I turned my back to the van.

"Oh, wait!" Kirisu called out, his head poking out the window. "I've got one more question. What's your sister's name?"

Tch. I'd dodged that question all day, only for him to corner me at the very last second.

Murderer or not, Kirisu seemed like he genuinely wanted to know more about her. But if he really *was* serious, he was better off not knowing.

"C'mon, just tell me, dude."

"Kanata. Ishizue Kanata."

Simple and memorable. Kirisu thought for a beat, then clapped his hands together.

"Hey, not bad! Your folks had some real flair. Arika, as in 'Here', and Kanata, as in 'Over There'. Sounds like you two were meant to be inseparable siblings!"

"Nah, it's Kanata, but written with the characters for 'flame' and 'hatchet.'"

An awkward silence settled between us.

We looked at each other with deadpan stares for a full ten seconds.

"Thoughts?"

"...Not a name you'd give a human."

Couldn't agree more.

But, like, once you got used to it, it was actually kind of cute.

／ Recollections of a Moonlit Hunt End

2.5 / Present (Winter 2004)

I never stopped running, not even to this day. But honestly, I've long since lost the speed I once had.

These past two years have drained me of my vitality, and the hunts I once longed for now only took place once a month. But even that's solely out of inertia. Lately, I haven't found any enjoyment in it whatsoever.

This office building made for a decent hideout. Endless power, a stash of snacks, tea, computers, and with the holiday season, no one coming in. It was perfect.

I dragged my sluggish body along and brewed some coffee. A lot had happened since then, but I still couldn't bring myself to enjoy the taste of coffee.

"...They're here."

But my respite was over.

Footsteps echoed from the floor below.

One person leading, two following behind.

The one in front was a woman; the two behind her were men.

The woman... good, she's definitely an adult. No need for hesitation, then.

"That van's been ruining my view since the morning. I really should've dealt with it earlier..."

I'd noticed the odd group parked on the main street. But there was a girl with them, so I didn't want to get close. I haven't mustered up the courage to look any young woman in the eyes since that night.

"...They're on the third floor now. Ugh. I really liked this place."

Sure, I wasn't moving quite as fast these days, but three people would be a walk in the park. I'd deal with them quick, then find a new spot to sleep before sundown—huh?

▪▪▪

"...Huh?"

By the time I turned, it was already over.

No, the truth was, my hunt had ended the moment that woman appeared.

Her dominance was absolute.

She ascended the stairs like a gale, burst in like lightning, and moved with the force of a storm.

I possessed the pride of a beast, the dignity of a hunter.

I thrashed about, desperate to land even a single blow, but the hunt concluded in under two minutes.

Ultimately, there's no animal strength that can topple human society from its apex position.

"Yamanashi Tomori, correct?"

She was, remarkably, the very incarnation of humanity.

Standardized. Stable. Mass-producible.

She neither wielded nor desired any special weapons.

Superior arms, by their very nature, resist mass production. For them, for the teeming masses of humanity, such weapons aren't suitable. What they value are mass-produced goods, crafted precisely to blueprints, with assured quality.

And in both her hands, the woman held precisely that: a Beretta M92.

The quintessential, standard modern semi-automatic pistol. Its weight, recoil, ammunition capacity, and price all met the average. With minimal defects and a female-friendly design, it was the standard-issue sidearm of a major firearms nation.

It was truly pathetic. I, who had surpassed humanity, was nothing more than a weakling, destined to be butchered by the mass production of mere humans.

"Finally caught you. This closes the Shikura Hills incident from two years ago. To think the only missing person from that case turned out to be a Possessed… how utterly fitting."

She knew everything.

What transpired that night two years ago. What I had done, what I had faced, and what I had desperately fled from.

"Don't give me too much credit. I'm not some all-knowing god. I only know what the reports say. That night, an hour elapsed between the first murder and the siege of the Ishizue residence. Yet all other assaults wrapped up in just half that time frame. Thirty minutes for everyone else, yet the culprit spent the same amount of time painstakingly butchering the Ishizue family? That just doesn't add up. The perpetrator of that incident was a speedster through and through. So why did they spend so much time at the Ishizue residence?"

Stop. I don't want to remember. That house. That devil of a girl.

"It's quite simple. Their spree ended at the Ishizue residence. A killer who'd operated in silence suddenly allowed a victim to let out a scream… while not entirely impossible, the efficiency displayed prior leads me to believe otherwise. That sequence of events simply doesn't make sense. Which means, the scream from the Ishizue residence must have come from someone other than the victim."

Yes. It had been *my* scream.

My hunt had begun with indiscriminate terror, sweeping through the houses in my neighbourhood. I was about to return home for the main course, for Mother and Father… but why, oh why, did I decide then that I might as well swing by the neighbours too?

The Ishizue home had been eerily silent. My instincts screamed a warning. But I ignored them. And there, in the living room, I stumbled upon her: Ishizue Kanata.

She merely glanced at my blood-soaked form and sighed, as though I were a stray mutt in need of a firm lecture.

"You're in the way. Could you please excuse yourself?"

She beamed like a blooming flower.

I harboured the pride of a beast, and I sensed that same primal essence within her. Therefore, I couldn't back down. We possessed similar appearances, which only made me reject being underestimated more fervently. I charged.

To this day, that terror still binds me.

We were both animalistic in form, yet the disparity in scale was immense, as if reality itself had warped.

I saw us both as lions. But the closer I drew, the further the illusion fractured, until it became painfully clear: she was a monster, ten, a hundred times beyond anything I could even fathom.

Ever since then, I haven't been able to face anything resembling a young girl. The fear clutches my heart. I, who once made girls my prey, could no longer hunt them.

"And that's how you ended up like this. I'll never understand how you Possessed think. It must've come as a surprise, but was it really such a shock that you even forgot how to speak?"

Huh? What was she talking about? I'd been babbling nonstop the entire time.

"Don't worry, I have no problem understanding that gibberish of yours. Doesn't make a difference if you don't even realize it. So, you turning yourself in? I'm here in my capacity as a police officer today. Not in the mood to play doctor."

Turn myself in? Those were *human* rules. I'd never heard of a beast considering its fangs a crime. I'd simply run through the city as my nature dictated and silenced the humans who witnessed me.

After all, if I let them go, the beast known as Yamanashi Tomori would be captured and killed. That's merely self-defence, isn't it?

"Human rules? That's an odd turn of phrase. Don't tell me you genuinely think you're some kinda animal."

Well, if I wasn't, how else could I explain why running was the sole thing that brought me joy?

"Idiot. The reason's obvious. Yamanashi Tomori, the reports indicate you had a habit of looking over your shoulder. Why couldn't you piece things together? Had you simply thought about it, you would have understood. You were always on the run from something. You didn't want to run; you simply couldn't bear to stop."

Couldn't bear to stop.

Yes, that was it. I hadn't wanted to stop. And the reason for that was—

"You lost your grandfather at five, didn't you?"

—because I'd done something terrible.

That summer day had been chasing me ever since.

"There's a psychiatric condition known as persecutory delusion: convincing yourself, without any real basis, that you're being pursued. In your specific case, however, the basis was indeed real. Granted, it's a relatively weaker trigger for an Agonist Disorder. The compressed electrical impulses in your brain attempted to resolve that trauma by inviting a devil in. I find it difficult to admit, but Possession often arises to support its host. And thus, you matured, never truly grasping what it was you desired."

What I'd desired.

To run. To transform into an animal, because it would be easier. Because my family had become a burden. Because I was a murderer. That night, when someone finally saw me for who I was, as a shiver of horror crawled up my spine,

"No. You weren't afraid of being exposed. You actually *desired* it. Because then, at last, you'd be free."

I turned to look back.

Where had everything gone wrong? Was it the moment I shed my humanity? Was that when I stepped off the ledge?

"How very human of you. As an officer, let me tell you this: devils only possess humans. A beast? Don't make me laugh. If you really *were* one, you wouldn't have hesitated to go straight for your brother, just like that monster did. Listen closely. There are two types of thrill killers: the disorganised, who are too maladjusted to even recognize their actions as crimes. And the organised, who are fully aware their actions are criminal and meticulously hide them to blend into society. Needless to say, you're—"

I'd acted strictly out of self-preservation.

To conceal my parents' murders, I slaughtered strangers. Hide a killer among killers, as the saying goes. I tried to drown my sins in a sea of faceless others. That was the moment I transformed into something truly vile.

"Do you get it now, Yamanashi Tomori? You're just an unlucky murderer who happened to walk straight into hell."

My head shook violently, and my limbs went numb. It wasn't the gunshot; it was something far more fundamental, draining my very strength.

Ah, but then again… these limbs had been exhausted for a long, long time, hadn't they?

"Oh? You lifted your head. Is that a sign of resistance?"

Of course it was. I was a beast, and as a beast, I would bare my fangs until my last breath.

"Suit yourself. But answer me this: which came first?"

The gun barrel leveled at me. Her final question left me utterly dumbfounded.

"I'm asking about the Ishizue residence. Did you arrive before or after the killings? That one detail could rewrite the entire story. Ludicrous as it is, there exists a possibility that not even a single person was—"

Was she talking about the living room? I was too terrified to recall. I lunged in one last, hopeless rush.

"Fine. Honestly, it doesn't matter either way."

Crack.

A dull sound as something punched through my thigh.

Unexpected. Given her skill, I'd assumed she'd instantly blow my skull open. Instead, my body and consciousness, which had been in perpetual flight for two years, slowly succumbed to sleep.

"Tough luck. Today, I'm operating as an officer, and preserving life takes precedence. Can't afford to make it that easy for you. And personally, I hate resorting to tranquilizers," she grumbled, then commanded the two arriving figures to patch me up.

…*Tch.* Unlucky down to the final breath.

My final hunt, utterly ruined. On what should've been an anniversary celebrated at peak performance, I was at my weakest, faced with the ultimate hunter.

But now, at long last, I could sleep.
That summer day had finally caught me.

／ formal hunt.end

/ FH

With the turn of the year to 2005, Ms. Mato showed up with a birthday present. Naturally, it wasn't for me, but for that *thing*.

"This is classified material, just so you're aware. It plays only once, so pay close attention. It's a direct request from the subject."

Mato set the laptop down. She double-clicked a video file ominously titled FH5.2.13; the name alone made my eyes twitch.

"Ms. Mato, what exactly does 'FH' stand for?"

"D-Don't ask me! It's probably some sick joke by the hospital staff. P-Perhaps it stands for 'Flame' and 'Hatchet'?"

A hatchet, for the record, is a thick, heavy-edged tool meant for splitting logs.

"...Seriously? Ms. Mato, that naming sense is straight out of the 80s."

"Are you deaf? The hospital staff named it. I merely signed off on the—ah, it's starting now, right here. Watch carefully. This footage directly correlates to the subject's behavioural improvements. And it even claimed it would 'sense' if you skipped any part, so..."

Gah, sense? Was it a ninja now?

"Fine. Any concern for *my* mental wellbeing here?"

"If your descent into depression makes it more cooperative, that'd be a more than welcome trade-off. A splendid return on investment, in fact."

The two-minute video concluded.

It featured a striking, mysterious beauty wrestling a sandbag in what appeared to be a gymnasium. There was no narration, only intermittent, unsettling eye contact with the camera.

The sandbag, tethered by a long chain, bounced and spun with the theatrical flourish of a dolphin at an aquarium show.

"What exactly am I watching? Some intergalactic wrestling champion?"

"It's surveillance footage. They asked us to send something, anything, so we forwarded the routine recordings. It's been two years, after all. Maybe it wanted to remind you what it looks like."

"....."

Now that I thought about it, today was its seventeenth birthday. You'd imagine that might make it seem a bit cuter, but that was absolutely not the case. Not when the sandbag very clearly weighed over a hundred kilos.

"That's about it. I'm leaving, then. Any comments?"

Might as well ask. While I didn't particularly want the answer, not asking felt like it'd be worse for my sanity.

There were numerous details to scrutinize, but the most pressing question was: "Uh... did it evolve?"

"Yes, it matured into an adult."

"Not that kind of growth. I meant more like, biologically—"

The conversation ended there.

Ms. Mato snapped her laptop shut, chugged down the remainder of her coffee, and marched straight to the front door.

"Well, I suppose I have one final thought to share." She offered a wry smile.

"Must be tough having a teenage sister. Wouldn't you say so, Big Bro?"

And with that, she was gone, leaving me staring into blank space.

Unbelievable.

Even more shocking than her having a sense of humour was the fact that, to my utter mortification, I'd been momentarily mesmerized by her.

'75: Deliveries lost

'76: Birth of Touma firstborn daughter.

'78: Basement of the Slumbering Forest.

'84: Birth of Ishizue firstborn son

'86: Karyou Estate incident. Karyou Estate demolished.

'88: Birth of Ishizue firstborn daughter.

'92: A certain surgery. Arika is 8, Kanata is 4.

'95: Manifestation of ■■. Nouzu Delusion Complex. Mr. Yamada combustion incident.

'01: January: Murder of Hisaori Couple. Hisaori Makina admitted to Origa Memorial Hospital. Hisaori Shinya transferred to psychiatric ward.

'03: February: Yamanashi Tomori disappearance incident. Hinomori Shuusei bizarre serial murders incident. Both unresolved. Ishizue Arika and Kanata admitted to Origa Memorial Hospital.

Early Summer: Ishizue Arika's examinations completed. Though deemed negative, discharge not permitted. Hisaori Makina makes contact with the Ishizue siblings.

Winter: Christmas at Origa Ward. Daydream (Malion in day dream).

'04:

Start of the Year: Hisaori Makina discharged. (HandS.R)

August: Ishizue Arika discharged. New life begins. Meets Karyou Kaie. (Ornamental Masquerade - HandS.L) First Errand. (S. VS. S)

August: Aftermath of HandS. Ishizue Arika gains direction for his new life: "I want to take life easy."

September: Second Errand. Kizaki Takashi Workaholic Ishizue Arika moves out of his family home and into the 13th Welfare Housing Complex.

October: Third Errand. Dog Policeman (Anorexic Bulimia - JtheE.)

New Year's Eve: Yamanashi Tomori arrested. (Hunting Moon Recollections - formal hunt.)

'05:

■■ Nouzu Delusion Complex (H-RED-B)

■■ Beauty of the Slumbering Forest. (S.Peeping Beauty)

■■ A Certain Anecdote (D.D.D)

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